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FRITZ AND DON. Page 158.

MIXED PICKLES

BY

EVELYN RAYMOND

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MIXED PICKLES.

CHAPTER I.

"OH!" gasped Grandmother Capers, throwing her hands upward with a gesture of dismay; "oh, what a terrible infliction!" And she began rocking herself violently to and fro, and screwing her lips about in the manner which, with her, always denoted extreme perturbation. Then she glanced across the pleasant room to a lounge and its occupant.

"I hope — it will not be, that!" responded Grandmother Kinsolving, feebly. She still held the bomb-like telegram between her trembling fingers, and was as yet too much overpowered by the announcement it contained to have a better answer ready.

"It is our own house, is it not, mother?" demanded Aunt Ruth, with some asperity.

A voice from the lounge took up the conversation.

"They can't come here; that is all there is about it. If they do, I shall leave." The speaker's tone was decided and aggressive. It caused the eyes of the other three persons in the apartment to fasten themselves upon the fretful face above the great pillows.

Only one of the three, however, had courage to reply. That one was Aunt Ruth, who should have been soft and yielding by nature had she lived up to her name. But she did not; neither did the plain garb of a Friend which she wore appear to have its customary effect in subduing the quick temper with which she had been born.

"If thee wishes to leave, thee is at perfect liberty to do so. The Kinsolving homestead cannot open its doors to one branch of the family and exclude another. Thee and thy kin are welcome here; so is dear Content; so shall my sister Lydia's children be."

With that, which was even more determined in tone than the invalid's had been, Ruth Kinsolving ended all remark upon the telegram, and went away to answer it.

"Grandmother, I shall not stay! I — I won't have everything upset by a lot of young ones!"

"There, there, Melville! don't worry, that's a dear. You know it is so bad for you. Besides, I am sure that Grandmother Kinsolving will not really take in such a lot of children to torment us all with." The old lady in the easy chair turned toward the one in the straight-back with a cajoling expression.

But the lovely old Friend had had time to regain her wonted calmness, and if the tone in which she responded was gentle in the extreme, it was also equally firm.

"Ruth has spoken the right word, though I wish that she had done so more patiently. When Oliver built this house he built it big and roomy. 'There must be space enough in it to hold all our household and the children which shall come after them,' he said. Lydia's flock must find a resting-place beneath the old roof-tree; but, if they are anything like their mother before them, they will not bring unhappiness to anybody."

A quiet sadness stole over the placid features under the snowy cap, and no one not utterly

selfish would have disturbed the mistress of the homestead by any further objection.

When the feeble lad, who absorbed as his right so much of the family attention, again began his impatient protest, Grandmother Kinsolving rose and followed Ruth.

Then arose such a howl of distress as speedily drove Grandmother Capers to the verge of hysterics and brought Content flying in from the orchard, where she had been writing a letter to her father.

"O Melville! what has happened? Are you worse, — suffering so terribly? Can I do anything for you?"

Melville ceased shrieking and broke into a subdued roar, as ominous to his slave, Grandmother Capers, as it was amusing to Content. But she veiled the mirth in her brown eyes, and went on speaking in that sort of soothing fashion which mothers use to a fretful infant.

Suddenly the cripple became silent, and looked up into his cousin's face with an eagerness of expression that showed how little real his grief had been. "Say, Content, does Aunt Ruth know

that my heart is affected, and that the doctor says I must have perfect quiet?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. You forget, Melville, that I am almost a stranger to our aunt."

"But — but she's your aunt, you know; you ought to know her!" exclaimed the lad.

"Maybe I ought; but then, you see, I don't. I never saw her till last Thursday, as you know; while you have lived with her for three years."

"And hated her all that time!" cried Melville, bitterly.

"Nonsense!" laughed Content.

"True! I — I wish she'd die, or get married!"

Even Grandmother Capers was shocked at this; and spoke reproachfully to her idol.

"You should not say that, darling. Ruth is a good woman. She means well, even if her manner is unpleasant."

Melville opened his lips to retort, but Content was too loyal to allow this. "Why, Mrs. Capers! Can you really think that? It seems to me Aunt Ruth is so charming. She is so

delightfully honest and true. From the first time I looked in her face I felt that I should be safe and happy with her. And as for grandma, I cannot tell you how lovely she appears to me. Papa used to tell such wonderful stories of her goodness that I was almost afraid to come and live with her; I was sure I should shock her a dozen times a day; but if I do she is too kind to show it."

"Why, Content! She thinks you are perfect. She held you up as an example to me yesterday, till I hated her almost as much as I do my aunt."

Into the midst of this mutual admiration talk broke a sound which was even more startling than the telegraph reading had been.

Clitter-ty-clatter! Yaw, whoop-la!

Melville raised himself upon his pillows, Grandmother Capers screamed, and Content ran to the window. Outside stood a tiny dog-cart, drawn by a sturdy little pony, driven by a lad who could not have seen more than eight summers, though his face bore freckles enough to have resulted from a dozen.

"Hello!" cried the licorice-stained mouth of

the small teamster. "Is this my grandmother's house?"

"Maybe; what is your grandmother's name?" said Content.

"I — er — I forget! It's — it's — dang it! Why ain't Paula here! She knows everything, and she'd know what it is. You see I came on ahead; me and Pretzel here. Ain't she a stunner? Uncle Fritz give her to me — give me the hull turnout. Say, do you live here? Have you got a grandmother what's an old Quaker lady, and lives in a big homestead with pigs and chickens and folks? Say, this is a big house, ain't it? I bet a cent this is the very place! Won't you just step in and ask if my grandmother does live here? 'Cause I'm all tuckered out. This cart shook me up awful, comin' up hill."

The speaker paused from lack of breath, and Content sprang through the low window-sash and held out her arms to the little fellow.

"I've no need to go and ask, for I am sure that you are my little cousin Fritz. Is it not so?"

"Yep. Anyhow, I'm Fritz; but who the mischief are you?"

"I'm Content; Content Kinsolving; aged fifteen, and your Uncle Benjamin's only child. But where are the rest of your party? The telegram said that all of Aunt Lydia's children were coming."

"Oh, they be; when they get ready. Paula, — she's a stick, — she told Uncle Fritz that she could not come till she had stopped to the hotel and freshened herself. She's always a freshening herself, Paula is, but I'm sure I don't know why, for she never does a blessed thing to get herself messed. Octave, now — Octave, she is a jolly one! she's always messing, but she never freshens. I like Octave."

"Indeed! most boys do like their sisters. But come, come quickly to dear grandmother! She will be so glad to see you!" and Content slipped her arm fondly about the child's waist, as he still sat in the cart.

"How do you know? I'm a 'terror,' Fritzy Nunky says, unless I'm good. And the trouble is, I can't stay good. I can be delightful some-

times, for little short times; then I forget and cut up. I used to try not to, but I've given it up now."

The satisfied and aged expression which settled upon the boyish face was funny in the extreme, and Content laughed more heartily than she had yet done since she parted with her father at Osaka, in far-away Japan.

"I know she will 'like' you; I do"; and she kissed again the pretty, dirty face of the young traveller, and lifted him out upon the grass.

"Where's the stable?"

"Around this way. Can you lead your horse?"

"I can, but I don't want to. I'm tired. Where's the hostler?"

"There is none."

Little Fritz opened his big eyes. "What'll we do then?"

"I'll lead him around to the barn."

Content took hold of the bridle, but, small as he was, this was more than the chivalrous nature of little Fritz could allow.

"Excoose me; but I'm the gentleman," he

said, with grave dignity, and took the bridle from his cousin's grasp.

She allowed him his will, finding in him something so lovable that he was already assured of one welcome in the household, no matter how the rest might yet regard him.

One of the farm hands was just putting up the stock for the night, and to him Fritz gave the care of his new possession, with a matter-of-fact manner which surprised the farmer into accepting it without protest.

"Rub her down well, boy, and don't drink her till she's cold. That's what Fritzy Nunky said. I don't know much about horses myself, but I do know that she isn't a 'him' like you called her, Content," laughed the tired little fellow, slipping his warm hand into his cousin's cool clasp.

The "boy," who was a gray-haired father of many children, received the young horse owner's directions in silent amazement, and looked after the pair as they left the barn-yard and entered the kitchen as if he didn't quite know whether he should believe his own ears or not. Finally,

he gave a low whistle, and ejaculated: "Jimminetty!" To him it appeared as if the self-possessed child and his dashing little turnout had dropped from the skies; but somehow he felt no reluctance to rubbing the tiny mare "down well." as he had been ordered, nor did he attempt to "drink her" until she was perfectly cool and it was safe to let her plunge her velvet nostrils into the trough of spring water at the barnyard gate.

Meanwhile, Content and the new arrival had entered the mansion by the kitchen, and had, after many pauses by the way, caused by the guest's curiosity, arrived at Grandmother Kinsolving's quiet room, where Aunt Ruth stood tying on her gray bonnet, preparatory to going out and dispatching her return message of welcome to the guardian of her sister Lydia's children.

Both mother and daughter stared at Content, but for a moment each supposed she had picked up her small companion from among the "boarders" who frequented their mountain settlement, and who strolled about over the pleasant roads at all hours.

"Well, and whom have you brought to visit me now, Content?" asked grandmother, smiling hospitably upon the little man.

"Can't thee guess, Grandma?"

"Oh, she need n't bother to guess. I 'd just as lief tell her. I 'm your little grand-boy, I reckon. Anyhow, I 'm Fritzy Pickel."

"Pickel! Not Pickel — not my daughter Lydia's Pickel?" cried the dear old lady, finding this second shock almost too much for even her credulity. It had been enough to receive that unexpected telegram from Mr. Fritz Pickel, the uncle and guardian of her dead daughter's family, announcing that he had, after a five years' absence, returned to America, and had brought all his wards with him, and expected, as a matter of course, to leave them with their maternal grandmother while he went journeying about on a six months' business tour.

The telegram had not mentioned any time for arriving, but the Kinsolvings had taken it for granted that it would not be before the following day.

"Ho! I suppose I am," laughed Fritz,

junior. "Fritzy Nunky says we're quite a jar full. He calls us 'mixed pickles,' and says he don't know which he likes best, the sweet or the sour. I say, are you my grandmother, truly? 'Cause you don't look like grandmothers mostly does. Lotta Hartmann, she had a grandmother, and, my! I would n't ha' kissed her for a cent. But I 'll kiss you, if you like."

Had Grandmother Kinsolving known it, she was receiving the highest compliment little Fritz ever bestowed upon any one; and she certainly did "like," for she opened her arms wide and the boy flew to them with a swift response of love in his generous little heart.

So there was welcome number two, or three; for the farmer at the barn may be counted upon as having given his in his undemonstrative way.

CHAPTER II.

SUCH a hubbub as ensued in the old homestead on the top of Deer Hill mountain, when, a half hour later, "Fritzy Nunky" arrived with his other charges, would baffle description; for the kindly German was one of those overflowing, effervescing mortals who go bouncing through the world as if their only mission were to "stir up" other quieter folk. But it was such a happy, generous stirring up that they who had once experienced it generally desired to have it again.

He was idolized by his nieces and his small nephew, to whom he stood in place of the half remembered parents, who had perished in a steamship disaster the last time they had left Germany to visit the mother's native land. For their sakes he had never married, lest his devotion to them should have to be less; and he had persistently done his utmost to spoil them, so far as unlimited indulgence tends that way.

Only to Paula he was a trial, — Paula, the eldest of the brood, who had artistic and literary tendencies; and who, having reached the mature age of sixteen, felt that she had wisdom and experience sufficient to sit in judgment on all her "betters." Strangely enough, "Fritzy Nunky" appeared to agree with her, and if there was one person of whom his sunshiny nature stood in awe it was of Fräulein Paula Pickel.

On Paula's pretty features, then, there rested an expression of grave disapproval during that supper which followed the arrival of the stranger grandchildren; for Uncle Fritz was so lost in admiration of his lovely old hostess, and so relieved to find The Snuggery such a delightful home for his darlings, that he was even more boisterous than ever.

Had Grandmother Capers and her invalid been present, there is no knowing what might have happened; but as soon as the noise of their arrival reached Melville's sitting-room, he had caused word to be sent to Grandmother Kinsolving that supper for himself and Mrs. Capers must be served apart from the others.

The gentle old hostess had been rather glad of this than otherwise, but Aunt Ruth, Friend as she was, had tossed her shapely head with a quaint air of disdain which boded a certain piece of her mind to be delivered at the fitting occasion and in the hearing of the two Capers.

"But, and my little jar of 'mixed pickles' will season your quiet life finely. And it amazes me that you two ladies should live here in this great house alone, with this young Fräulein!" exclaimed Uncle Fritz, sweeping his eyes over the feminine trio, whom he supposed constituted the family at the The Snuggery.

"But, it is not alone, Fritzy Nunky," corrected Paula, severely. "Our Aunt Ruth has told you twice already that a Mrs. Capers and our cousin Melville, her grandson, are also members of the family."

"Ah! so? Then I beg Miss Ruth's sweet pardon. Paula finds me ever a blunderer, dear madam," he concluded, looking deprecatingly toward the hostess's sympathetic face.

Grandmother Kinsolving smiled. "Thee is a blunderer of the happy sort, then, Fritz. I can

understand now why my Lydia used to speak of her brother-in-law with such affection."

"Is it so?" queried Uncle Fritz, his big blue eyes filling at mention of the dead woman who had been a true sister to him. "And, but we thought not of the 'in-law.' Franz was always deep in my heart's love, and when Lydia came, she nestled close beside him. Christina, there, is the mother made anew for us. Thou wilt find comfort in little Christina," he added fondly, laying his broad hand on the flaxen braids of his youngest niece, who blushed and smiled gratefully at the commendation.

"And what of me, Fritzy Nunky? Am I not a comfort, also?" asked the tall Octave, demurely.

"Praise goes unsought, sweetheart. It never answers to bidding, thou witch! Octave will make thee great care, Frau Kinsolving. She has a big heart and a head full of heedless ways. Octave is my brother Franz, as little Christina is my sister Lydia."

Again the grave tenderness fell upon the spirits of those who best remembered the dead.

Content felt herself almost an alien, since all were strangers to her save the grandmother and aunt whom she had known but three short days. A moment's longing for her own absent father who was the one son of the house stole over her, and she turned her eyes westward through the open window, as if looking toward him brought her nearer to the missionary in far-away Japan.

But there was no division in Amy Kinsolving's heart, and the lonesome look of her little Content touched her heart, as she leaned forward to lay her hand kindly upon the girl's slender one. "A strange reunion, Fritz; a strange ruling of Providence that all my children's children should have been brought to the old nest at one and the same time. Benjamin has sent us his motherless Content, that we may rear her to good and housewifely ways; Harriet's poor crippled lad and his paternal grandmother have dwelt with us these three years; and now thee comes bringing a whole —"

"Jar of mixed pickles!" interrupted Octave, with no intention of disrespect, but in the heedlessness which was her characteristic.

"Octave!" cried Paula; "apologize to grandmother!"

"Apologize yourself!" retorted Octave, pertly; then blushed furiously, remembering to whom she had been discourteous. "I do apologize, dear, sweet little grandma. Not for Paula's tongue, though, but because I would n't do a shabby thing to you if I could help it. But I never shall do any better; I'm born to be horrid," she concluded with such complacent serenity that Content laughed.

"What you laughing at?" demanded Fritz, junior, stopping his noisy consumption of a third bowl of milk. "I like to know all the fun."

"I'm afraid you would not understand this; but I was not laughing at any one," returned Content, flushing a bit at her lack of self-control.

"But you can tell, can't you? You've got a tongue."

"Well, then, it struck me as very funny that Octave and your own small self have already decided that there is no use in trying to improve yourselves, and are so perfectly satisfied that it should be so."

Fritzy's puzzled little face, after this long explanation, showed that he had not comprehended it as well as he expected; but a swift, keen glance from Octave's dark eyes intercepted one from Content, and a bond of interest was instantly formed between these two stranger cousins whose training had been so different.

Fritz slipped down from his chair, when he had at length filled himself to the utmost capacity with his Aunt Ruth's good things, and sauntered carelessly out of the room. No one thought to forbid his exploring any part of the house which attracted his curiosity, and Aunt Ruth disdained, while Grandmother Amy forgot, Melville's fretful request that he should not be disturbed by any family visits that night.

Melville Capers was accustomed to consider his word as law, and for the sake of peace it generally was such. His anger and astonishment then was great when, as he had just composed himself for a nap, the door of his sitting-room opened, and a small person in dusty knickerbockers walked coolly in.

The fourteen-year-old boy on the sofa had a

voice suited to a man, or at least to a youth of much stronger physical development than its owner's, and when this voice demanded in its fiercest tones, "Why are you intruding here?" it surprised, if it did not intimidate, the visitor.

Now old Oliver Kinsolving had been, according to his neighbors' dictum, "a man of a great substance"; which meant not so much substance of money, though he was rich enough, but rather substance of character, will power, honesty, and kindliness. It was curious to note how each of his descendants possessed at least one factor of their grandsire's "substance," to wit, his will; and little Fritz, though he was the smallest of the flock, was yet to demonstrate that he inherited not the smallest share of this same quality.

The child had said to himself, as he left the dining-room, that he would see every nook and cranny of the big, new home before he went to sleep that night. He was not, therefore, to be balked of his project simply because a big boy on a lounge roared at him. His momentary hesitation vanished, and his retort came so promptly

that no hesitation had really been perceived by the questioner.

"I ain't intruding; I'm 'specting of my grandmother's house. I should like to know who you are, any how."

"I'll teach you who I am if you don't get out of here pretty sudden!"

"Pooh! Who's afraid?" demanded Fritz, coolly and impudently.

"You. Five seconds, now! Then get!"

"Get yourself!"

"I will, — cripple as I am, — if you don't leave here instanter!"

"Cripple? That's a boy without feet or hands. I seed one once at the Museum in Munich. My! but he was n't like you. He had a voice. Cracky! how that crippler did sing! You cripple, can you sing, too, as well as holler?"

"Clear out, I tell you! You infernal little imp!"

"Ain't a imp. Imps goes down traps and holes in theatres. I've seen 'em. Ginger! ain't you a cross-looking boy?"

The child had come fearlessly forward, and was bestowing upon the invalid a critical scrutiny, which naturally made its sensitive recipient writhe.

"Clear out, quick! or I'll throw this book at your head!"

"You dassent!"

For answer the volume of Dickens with which Melville had been passing away his tedious afternoon, whizzed past the intruder's curly pate.

In an instant all his fiery temper had roused. The child was used only to kindness and indulgence; his few "fights" had been with poor children on the city street in that distant home in Germany, and he had never attempted one with "an equal." His little chest swelled, his head tossed back, his voice took on a new tone. "You coward, you! If I had Fritzy Nunky's Winchester here, I'd blow your head right square off you! You — you — mean thing!"

"Will you go?"

"No!"

"What will you do?"

"Come and pound you! That is, if you can't get off your old lounge!"

"Come on!" sneered Melville, little dreaming that his menace would be accepted.

But it was; and in another second the round, dirty fists of little Fritz were beating and punching the face and sides of the really helpless invalid. Melville defended himself as best he could, and cried aloud for his grandmother. But that unsuspecting woman was taking her evening constitutional at a good distance from the house, and did not hear him.

As he saw his adversary evidently weakening the belligerent Fritz felt his courage grow apace, and he became quite carried away with his own prowess.

But after a considerable interval, he realized that his blows were no longer parried, and that Melville's claw-like hands lay supinely on the robe which half covered him.

"Humph! Thought I could n't lick you, did n't you? And I showed you diffrunt! Humph! Got enough, have n't you?" And with immeasurable contempt Fritz stepped back and regarded the motionless figure upon the lounge. He stood thus for a long, long time; then sud-

denly the memory of a story his uncle had told him of a boy who killed his brother in a "fight" rushed into his mind.

Had he killed this boy of the roaring voice? A quick little sob escaped his babyish lips, and in an awful terror he turned and fled.

They were just rising from their long, after table talk when the door of the supper-room opened furiously, and a small boy with a very white face appeared on its threshold. The big, staring eyes and the quivering lips did not seem to belong to their little Fritz, and every one paused in expectation, as he cried in his terrified treble: "There's a homely, great boy on a lounge, and I've just killed him!"

CHAPTER III.

"FRITZ! Fritzy Pickel! What is that you say?" demanded Uncle Fritz, who of all the astonished company was the first to recover his speech.

"He's dead! Dead as Otto Skaats!" wailed the terrified child. "I fit him and beat him; but I did n't — I did n't mean to do it so hard!"

"Otto Skaats" had been the unlucky hero of Uncle Fritz's doleful tale.

"Come to me, nephew!" ordered Uncle Fritz sternly, and the little boy sorrowfully obeyed.

"Now tell Fritzy Nunky every single thing." Mr. Pickel sat down upon the sofa and took his favorite into the safe shelter of his arms. Sympathy, he knew, was the shortest road to confidence.

"I went to see the house, and I found a boy. He was big and crosser than anything. He could n't be my truly cousin, Fritzy Nunky, 'cause he was n't a gentleman. He ordered me

out of his place like he owned the hull concern; and he dasted me to fight. I wanted to lick him, and I did; but I didn't 'spect to kill him."

At the recollection of Melville's white face, the young pugilist hid his own on Uncle Fritz's broad shoulder and began sobbing as if his heart were broken.

Fortunately, at that moment Aunt Ruth re-entered the room. She had waited to hear but the first words of the little lad's self-accusation, and had then flown swiftly to Melville's side. For an instant she had gazed upon the inert figure, horrified, and actually believing that the tale was true. Another instant, and she resisted the thought as something too terrible to have really come into such quiet lives as theirs. She found the death-like stupor only a faint after all; and her heart gave a great throb of thankfulness. She had never loved, and was far too honest to pretend affection for, her elder nephew; but in that moment she realized the truth of the old saying that "blood is thicker than water." She had not loved him simply because he was not

lovable; but a hope arose within her that he might yet become so.

"I've been too severe with him, no doubt," said truthful Ruth to herself; "and I've had too great contempt for his supreme selfishness. But who knows? Maybe in his place I should have been a deal more disagreeeble — if that were possible!"

This soliloquy had not hindered the work of her capable hands, and very speedily she had the satisfaction of seeing the invalid revive. When he recovered so far as to answer her question, he replied, that 'he was all right, only his head felt queer.' "I don't remember what happened to me. Oh, yes, I do too! Where is that little imp?"

"Humph! thee'll live!" replied Aunt Ruth.

"Live? Why should n't I?" demanded Melville.

"Thee has just had a pretty serious thrashing, and, I fancy, the first one of thy experience. Little Fritz must have hit thy temple, for I see it is discolored. The blow in that particular place was what made thee faint, I suppose."

"Now will you insist upon keeping him here?"

"Certainly."

"A boy as dangerous as that?"

"Melville Capers, I am ashamed of thee! Even if thee is an invalid it is no reason why thee should be a coward! It does not seem as if there could be one drop of Kinsolving blood in thy veins."

Melville was still weak, and he was too utterly astonished at his aunt's indignation to reply. He lay staring at her until a well-known step was heard in the passage and Grandmother Capers came into the room. Then ensued the customary roar with which the cripple expressed his disapprobation of things in general and of this latest grievance in especial.

"Boohoo! Row row-wow-ow!" No written word can convey the sound; it made quick-tempered Ruth think of nothing but an angry calf, and the pity which had sprung up in her heart gave way to disgust.

So it was with a very contemptuous expression on her fair face that she re-entered the

supper-room, where Grandmother Kinsolving sat trembling, and herself on the verge of fainting, while the younger ones had grouped themselves about Uncle Fritz and his sobbing burden.

"Well?" asked that gentleman, eagerly, though already relieved by Ruth's manner.

"Perfectly well! Or, rather, perfectly safe. Doubtless Melville does feel a bit the worst for being knocked senseless, but he is sufficiently himself again, *I* think!"

She said this with the funniest little emphasis on the "I," and the young Pickels' curiosity was whetted. The more, indeed, that this odd new aunt of theirs at that instant held up her hand to make them listen. The wailing and roaring penetrated even to that remote apartment, and caused Grandmother Kinsolving's sweet face to flush.

"Ruth, thee should not! Remember the lad is thy own nephew. He is frail, and not to be judged by common rules."

"And, because he is of our own blood, — which I find it hard to believe, — I want all these new children of ours to understand him at the

outset. Thee is always fond of having things 'start right,' and I have caught thy habit." The tender look in the daughter's eyes corrected any possible rudeness in her speech; and, seriously she was in earnest about having the new family "start right."

For three years Melville had been a terrible trial to her; the worse because she saw only too plainly that his suffering, which was real enough at times, and his wretched disposition, were wearing her mother's strength away. Ruth Kinsolving felt, and rightly, that one such life as Amy Kinsolving's was worth more to the world than dozens like Melville's; and she hoped from this inrush of young life that household matters might be straightened out.

When Content came to them, it had been after long objection on her aunt's part; which, however, the girl herself did not know. But when Benjamin wrote about his "only, motherless child," Ruth's *retroussé* nose had tilted itself a little higher, and her firm mouth had closed a little more firmly. For her part, she had had quite enough of "only children," no matter how

close their kinship, nor how orphaned their state.

Grandmother Amy had said very little, and had said that little gently; but, meek as she was, she was also wise; and much as she leaned upon her capable daughter, she had never let go the reins of management from her own fragile hand.

"Thee will do thy duty, Ruth, as thee has been trained to do. Benjamin and Benjamin's belongings have as much right in The Snuggery as thee has. If there were a dozen children and he wished me to receive them, I should bid him send them. Since there is only one, and that a girl, I look to thee to be her second mother."

Ruth reserved her own opinion about the mothering part, but she obediently wrote the letter of welcome; and was glad to her heart's core when its living answer looked up into her eyes with a gaze as fearless and honest as her own and with far more of sweetness.

Having been so agreeably disappointed in Content, she was prepared to welcome the little Pickels with greater cordiality; and she formed

a project, then and there, that the family should make one united effort to reconstruct poor Melville, and make him a credit to them.

So, taking little Fritz from his uncle's arms, she led the party into the south room, where through the open windows the moonlight fell as she fancied it could fall only on Deer Hill, and there she told them Melville's short and painful history.

Ellison Capers had brought distress upon the family hearth from the first time his shadow rested there. She entered into few details, thinking it unwise that listeners so youthful should yet learn them; but she showed them that her sister Harriet had died none too soon to hide her broken heart, and that through the curse of his own father's dissipation had come poor Melville's ruined, crippled life. Whether he had fallen or been thrown from his father's arms, when that father was intoxicated, they never knew; but they did know that from that fall dated all the son's suffering. There was something wrong with the spine, but a trouble which as yet no physician had ever been able to set right.

Unconsciously to herself, as she talked, Aunt Ruth's voice took on a tone of soft and womanly pity, and it did not seem to those who listened as if she could ever have spoken of her nephew so contemptuously as they had heard her speak a little while before.

"Well, this other 'Grandmother Capers?' Cannot she do anything to make him bear his trouble better?" asked Uncle Fritz.

"If she can, she does not. Ellison was her only son, and of course our invalid is her only grandchild. Her idea of love appears to be unlimited indulgence —"

Here poor "Fritzy Nunky" began to glance about uneasily, but Ruth's next words showed him that nothing personal had been intended.

"Oh! I was n't thinking of thee, sir. I fancy that thee can say no — once in a way, if need be. But Mrs. Capers cannot. She is, unfortunately, very wealthy, and she has let Melville know that all she has will one day be his. That he may not live to inherit appears never to occur to either of them. The boy is utterly spoiled; and if he were any older I should give him up as

hopeless. But he is only fourteen, and very clever-witted, — though it might not seem probable to those who hear him bray so!"

A renewed sound of woe or wrath warned them that Grandmother Capers was in for a tussle with her charge.

"Ruth! Ruth!"

"The noise *is* certainly like that Don makes, mother."

"Who's Don?" asked Fritzy, suddenly sitting up straight.

"He's a donkey."

"Does he live here, too?"

"Yes. He is very old. Thy dear mother and I used to ride him once upon a time."

"I may ride him, may n't I?"

"If he is willing."

"How can he tell? Does he talk?"

"He has a very expressive way of making people understand his likes and dislikes. Thee shall try him to-morrow. Thee can hardly keep thy eyes open now, and we will go up to see how fresh and sweet grandmother's sheets do smell."

Fritz, junior, immediately climbed down, and

slipped his hand within his aunt's. It was evident that they two would speedily understand each other. And Ruth's quick feeling was deeply touched, when, as the sleepy little fellow knelt down to say his "good-night word to God," he begged that trusted Father to 'forgive him for killing the crippler'; "no, for not killing him" — he went on; "oh! I don't know what I mean; but God does every time, Fritzy Nunky says."

But the unwise if earnest woman had inaugurated a work the magnitude of which was doomed to make even her valiant spirit quake. She returned to the south room to find all its young occupants deep in the discussion of Melville's reformation; and each with a different and distinct plan for its accomplishment.

Grandmother had gone to sit with her invalid, and Uncle Fritz was resting on the sofa. None of the earnest talkers heeded her entrance, or were conscious of it; but when she had quietly listened to the varying projects, and the unmistakable quality of the family "substance" with which each was advocated, her courage failed.

"I'll fight him out on his own line!" declared

the tomboy Octave; "I 'll teach him that he has got to be a man and not a baby!"

"No," said Paula, with scorn; "Nothing can be done by being unladylike. I am going to treat him as if we were grown-up folks. A gentleman should be ashamed to cry like a child. I 'll teach him German."

"I 'll — I don't know what I can do," said Christina; "but I 'll do something! He shall not worry my sweet, new grandmother!"

"Oh, there must be unity, my dears," said Aunt Ruth, joining in the talk.

"And 'Fritzy Nunky,' as you call him, has n't said his word yet," added Content. "Suppose we try and find out what he would suggest."

"Going to bed!" retorted the guardian of many Pickels.

"Oh, but Nunky! How would you, if you were going to be here, how would you reform the horrid fellow?" demanded Octave, imperiously.

"I? Well, I should just try loving him." And with that wisest project of all, the conclave broke up.

CHAPTER IV.

"I HAVE stirred up a hornet's nest, mother."

"Ruth! Where?"

"Only a mental one, dear. Thee must not take me too literally. But I unwisely asked Lydia's children to help me in trying to improve Melville, and they responded only too briskly."

Then the daughter related what she had overheard in the south room.

"And Fritz was the only one in the right of it," was Grandmother Kinsolving's brief comment.

"How can one love what is not lovable? I have been trying three years, and thee knows I have not succeeded over well," answered Ruth, soberly.

"I think thee has tried less to love than to make, daughter. Just thee leave off the making part, and follow Fritz Pickel's good advice. Then

thee will be the example to the children that thee should be."

"There is another way out of it, mother dear. Margaret Capers and Melville are always threatening to 'leave,' when things do not move just to their notion. Now we have a good reason for letting them keep their word. The peace which would follow their going would be balm to my soul, and marrow to your bones, Mother Amy."

The old lady did not notice the remark, but went on putting away her gray silken gown as carefully as if it were not to be taken out and worn again on the morrow. Then she folded her snowy kerchief and placed it in its own appropriate drawer of the old-fashioned chiffonier, smoothing out every wrinkle with a lingering daintiness of touch that seemed a sort of ceremony to the less careful Ruth, who enjoyed nothing better than to watch her mother dressing and undressing.

"There would be a vanity in all that fussiness, if it were any one but thee who was guilty of it, Mother Amy," said the younger, busier woman, fondly.

"If thee would spend more time over thy clothes and less over the household cares, thee would not get so weary, Ruth."

"Why, mother! I never told thee I was weary!"

"The tone of thy voice tells it, dear. I know that this opening our doors to so many new cares will fall heaviest on thee, my child. Thee must watch thyself, betimes, and be beforehand with love. That will oil the wheels and make them move noiselessly. One thing I foresee gladly. Thee will find enough in little Fritz to make up to thee for all thy labor for him. Yet he is a child born to mischief. And I think thee will have less time to worry over Melville, now this other nephew has come."

"Yes, I do love him already. Who could help it? He seems a typical boy, — healthy, hearty, and roguish, but warm-hearted and chivalrous as well. I'll put up with Paula for the sake of Fritzy. Bless the little man! I should like to spank Paula. What a contrast to Content!"

"They will do each other good."

"But, mother, what about the Capers? If they wish to go, had we not better let them? Thee knows it is not for the need of their board money we keep them; and now these other natural claims are made upon thee, thee can say we want the three extra rooms, as indeed we do. I was ashamed to put Fritz Pickel into such a pigeonhole as the little room under the stairs, and it was all there was left to offer him."

"Fritz Pickel will do very well if he has always such a comfortable and cleanly bed to rest him on; and it is not he who is troubled, but thy own housewifely heart. Go now to sleep, my child. On thee will fall the burden of the day, and thee must rest. All that the past day has brought to our door, that will we keep; and because of the new bringing we will not discard the old."

So dismissed, and understanding perfectly that her mother's determination was final, Ruth Kinsolving went to her own chamber to lie awake and borrow anxiety, as was her nature.

Meanwhile, the victim of that evening's discussion tossed fretfully on his own luxurious bed — by far the most comfortable one the every-

where comfortably furnished house afforded. He knew nothing, of course, of the eager plans for his reformation which his cousins, "the intruders," had laid; but he was perfectly capable of forming plans on his own side, not indeed for the reformation of the enemy but for its utter extirpation.

"They are enemies, the whole posse of them. The little imp is but a sample of the lot. Of that I am positive. But if they think they are going to bully me, just because I am a sick boy, they 'll find themselves mightily mistaken. If I can't fight with my fists I can with my brain, and I will make that whole batch of Pickels sorry they ever heard of The Snuggery. I will so!"

"What is it? What did you say, darling?" asked Grandmother Capers, who entered from her own apartment in swift anxiety. She boasted that she always slept with one eye open, and Melville, at least, believed her. Wake when and how he would, her quick ear caught the difference in his breathing, and she was at his side, attentive and submissive.

Grandmother Capers was considered a "world-

ly old woman," by those who felt themselves competent to judge; and, indeed, she was a great contrast to Grandmother Kinsolving, as well in her speech and faith as in her personal appearance. But whatever might be her mental or moral weaknesses, in one thing she was strong; and that was in her supreme, untiring devotion to her grandson. It seemed to Amy Kinsolving as if Ellison's mother was seeking, by the consecration of her every faculty to Ellison's child, to make up to him for the terrible injury he had suffered at his parent's hands. If the devotion wearied Melville, he was still so accustomed to it that he would scarcely have known how to exist without it.

But he resented it as if it had been an insult.

"I do wish that I could ever move without your eternal asking: 'What is it, darling?' I hate the sound of your voice!"

Mrs. Caper's dark eyes filled with tears, and the pretty pink color on her round, old cheek deepened; but Melville could not see this, and, if he had been able, he would not have cared.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you, dear; but it is

better that than that you should need me and I not be at hand."

The old lady's tone was apologetic and humble — a tone which, whenever Ruth Kinsolving heard it, made her blood boil. That anyone of her race should force such a tone into the voice of an aged woman was one of the many hard things she had to endure on account of her elder nephew.

"Well, see that you don't do it again, then! And go to bed, can't you? I wish you'd shut the door between. If I could walk a step, I'd soon find a way to keep you out!"

"There, there, sweetheart, don't you worry! You know it is so bad for you. If you want me, don't fail to call."

There was little fear that this would ever happen, but it was a tender injunction which Grandmother Capers never failed to give.

She returned to her own bed, and fell into another "cat nap," from which she was roused again, after a brief interval, by hearing Melville breathing deeply and in a manner to startle anybody even less doting than she. Quietly as a

mouse, fearing further rebuff, the old lady crept forward until she could peer through the doorway.

Melville was not asleep. He was sitting as nearly upright in bed as he was able to do, and his eyes were fixed upon the open window, and the moonlight which he loved, and which, though against his faithful nurse's judgment, he insisted should never be shut out by curtains.

The moonlight? Something far whiter and brighter than that. Something which moved up and down, up and down, slowly and monotonously.

Grandmother Capers's eyes followed her grandson's, and for the first time in her life she became oblivious to his existence.

Even in modern America there are some houses old enough to have ghostly traditions, and The Snuggery was one of these. On certain nights of the midsummer, when the moon was at its full, "spirits were seen to walk," through the box-bordered garden-paths; and to sway rythmically, like folks in "meeting," above the shaven lawn. These old tales had always been

recounted, but it was not until within the last five years, and since the ocean shipwreck which had brought such heart shipwreck to the old homestead, that some voices whispered knowingly how one of these wandering spirits was that of the drowned daughter of the house.

What more fitting, then, than that, on the very first night of their arrival here, the ghost of the children's mother should revisit the home of her childhood and now of theirs?

Grandmother Capers did not for one instant question the evidence of her senses. She was credulous by nature, and somewhat ignorant, despite her many years, and she remained spell-bound where she had paused.

Up and down, up and down, the tall slim creature of the upper air moved, as if blown about by the wind. Grandmother did not have on her spectacles, but she was moderately sharp of vision still; and she was sure that the ghost had long blonde hair and blue eyes. So had Lydia Kinsolving, in the days of her youth.

Then the watcher became conscious that it was not an aimless tossing of ethereal substance

that made the light wind's sport; there was motion, and method in the motion, which seemed strangely familiar to Margaret Capers. Oddly enough, the days of her own youth and belleship recurred to her; days in which she had danced in stately waltzes as unlike the modern ones as grace is unlike awkwardness.

She forgot to be afraid, remembering so distinctly. She forgot that it was said to presage evil if one unwittingly paused to watch a "spirit." She forgot everything but the waltz movement which had once been dearer to her giddy soul than food to her healthy body. She leaned forward, entranced; but when, presently, the ghostly dancer began to sing, in time to her own motion, the very words of a love-song Margaret Capers had often sung, the fascinated observer aroused with a start.

It was her warning! She knew it, recognized it! She uttered a terrified shriek, so piercing that it silenced Melville from responding, and brought Aunt Ruth flying, like another ghost, in her long nightgown to the invalid's room.

But when she beheld Grandmother Capers

gazing distraught and horror-stricken through the open window, her glance followed swiftly after.

And with her own bodily eyes, in a sickening fear utterly new to her, Ruth Kinsolving looked upon what she actually believed to be her own sister's wraith.

CHAPTER V.

THAT is, for one brief, ridiculous moment she so believed. Then, with a blush at her own credulity, Aunt Ruth speedily hurried out of doors and laid her energetic mortal hand upon the specter's shoulder.

"Paula! Paula Pickel! What in the name of common-sense is thee doing?"

But, as it was something rather in the nature of uncommon sense, Paula did not immediately answer.

A second, more vigorous shake awoke the young somnambulist, though to a dazed and unsatisfactory condition which was as puzzling to Aunt Ruth as the whole episode was. But the girl gradually came to herself, and her first exclamation cleared the ghostly mystery.

"Dear me! Have I been walking in my sleep again?"

"I should say thee had," retorted the aunt, feeling very decidedly provoked at having so many people disturbed. "Thee has frightened Grandmother Capers half to death with thy uncanny dancing. Come now, at once, and show her who and what thee is. Then, maybe, the old lady can get a bit of rest. Between thee and Melville it will be little enough at the most."

Paula resented her aunt's tone and manner: she acknowledged no authority except her own will, and, occasionally, that of her Uncle Fritz.

"You have no right to speak like that to me—none whatever. Besides, I am not going to meet a stranger in this dishabille. I am sorry that I walked in my sleep, but I am not to blame for it."

The young girl drew herself stiffly away from the firm touch which still held her shoulder, and with an air of offended dignity started to re-enter the house.

Ruth released her clasp, suffering Paula to follow her own inclination; but a keen perception of the ludicrous was so thoroughly awakened that the aunt could not restrain a hearty laugh.

Truth was, Ruth Kinsolving was little more than a girl, herself; a wholesome-natured if high-spirited one, and, as mother Amy too well knew, but ill fitted to rule over a houseful of young folks, like these whom Providence had brought to her door. Doubtless, being blessed with excellent sense, she would find a way for herself out of the puzzle; and a way which would retain her own self-respect while still commanding theirs. But as yet she had not even thought about this way, nor of anything but the immediate needs of her great family.

Paula turned, in a fury; forgetting instantly her determination to show these American relatives what a great lady she was, and becoming the actual reality, — a very quickly offended, untrained girl.

"I do not see occasion for laughter in my misfortune, Aunt Ruth; and I wish that Uncle Fritz had never brought us here. You may as well learn in the beginning that I never wished to come and that I shall go away as soon as possible."

A sharp retort formed itself in Ruth Kinsolving's mind, but rested there unspoken.

"I was not laughing at thee, dear little Paula, but at the absurdity of thy attempted dignity, clad just as thee is. It is high time we were both in doors, and thinking less about ourselves and more about our neighbors. Come."

Aunt Ruth slipped her arm, covered only by its cambric sleeve, about the waist of her niece, and would have guided her affectionally back to her chamber.

But Paula would not. She had been a trifle touched by the soft tone in which this new aunt had said "dear little Paula," but she was slower to forget resentment than to feel it. So she hurried forward alone, and made her way to the room where Christina was sleeping, in the refreshing rest which follows a simple supper and bedtime thoughts of sweet good-will.

Ruth went to Grandmother Capers, and found the old lady greatly shaken by the shock she had received. Surprising as it was, Margaret Capers persistently refused to accept Ruth's plain and natural explanation of the affair, and reiterated

her belief that she had really seen a spirit, whose visitation was intended as a warning of direful things to come.

From his room adjoining, Melville heard the discussion and terminated it in his own fashion: "Go to bed, grandma, and keep still! If, at your age, you want to be a fool, be one, and not bother other folks about it! As for you, Aunt Ruth, I wish you would get me a drink of fresh water out of the well, and take yourself off out of the way. I hate this night rowing! If you don't get back to that side of the house pretty soon, some of the rest of your imps will be breaking loose! I'll make grandmother get out of this!"

"Thee will, in a sense thee little understands, ungrateful boy!" replied his long-suffering aunt, after she had drawn and brought the water. "And I will ask thy permission to give thee a bedtime thought. If there are any 'imps' under this roof this night, they are locked up in thy own selfish heart. If thee is really a Kinsolving, see to it that thee treats that poor old woman in yonder with common decency. One of these nights thee will order her and she will

not obey." And with that for a good-night, the much tried young house-mistress took herself off.

Melville was sufficiently nervous to find sleep impossible for weary hours to come; and it is probable that the self-indulgent lad had never done a greater amount of thinking in a like space of time.

" Aunt Ruth has a way of saying things which cut; but they generally cut in the right place when she says them to other people! Did she mean it? Am I an 'imp,' myself? I suppose I don't speak very respectfully to grandma, sometimes; but she is such a silly thing that she tries me awfully. And everybody knows I am an incurable invalid. It's a pity I can't talk as I please, when I am doomed to lie here like a log! I'd be a saint if I had that little imp Fritz's legs and fists! How he did use them, though! And I could n't but admire the young monkey, in spite of my anger, he did so make me think of one of Abraham's bantam roosters. Well, maybe some of the Pickels will be relishable; and if they are, I 'll try not to scare them away by crossness."

From which soliloquy of Melville's it will be seen that while the would-be reformers had all gone to bed in the truly missionary spirit, the sinner to be reconstructed was doing his own best to make his stubborn clay pliable to their touch. Also, that his threat of "getting out of this" was a threat merely, and not to be taken seriously.

CHAPTER VI.

FRITZ, junior, slept soundly; but he had a child's fashion of waking early. When he found the sunlight shining into his eyes through the window which, being unaccustomed to care for young folks, Aunt Ruth had forgotten to darken, — and thus insure her own undisturbed morning nap, — he sat up in bed and looked about him. He was perfectly wide awake on the instant, and the cheerfulness of the sunlight was scarcely greater than the clear light of the lad's own happy nature.

"I was a dreadful bad boy, last night! I 'm awful sorry I licked the crippler and — by jingo! I 'll go and tell him so!"

Paula had labored long and seriously with her little brother; but he did n't take polishing well at all — that is, of the sort which his elder sister was minded to give him. It made not the slightest impression on this small man to be forbidden a dozen times a day to use the language which came naturally to his lips, and which from his

association with the boys of the street he had come to consider smart.

More than this, Uncle Fritz was always inclined to concur in Fritz, junior's, own opinion. But, for the matter of that, pretty nearly everything the little lad did was "smart" in the eyes of his adoring uncle, who firmly believed that his namesake was an epitome of every human grace and virtue. He would not have had the child different for half his fortune; and it was well for the little fellow that he had the wholesomest and sweetest of natures, and that he had sprung from a race of gentlefolk.

But there was a polishing he did take, readily. If by any chance — alas! they were frequent — he had inadvertently really pained any living heart, he could not rest till he had done his childish utmost to banish that pain. Once, on one never-to-be-forgotten, dreadful day, he had told Fritzy Nunky a lie! "Story" does not express it; fib is too mild; falsehood or untruth indicate a premeditation which was absent from the offence; so, though it is an ugly word, never to be carelessly uttered or written, it must stand.

No matter what the lie was about; that was between the two Fritzes. Suffice it to tell that the big Fritz had suffered actual agony, fearing that his idol was going to be found wanting in that first foundation of all nobility, — truthfulness. And the little Fritz has seen the agony, and — but the sorrow of a little child is sacred.

So that rough corner of his character was polished till the shining gold showed bright and sparkling. Fritz never told a second lie; nor would he have done so for any enticement which could have been offered him.

Now he remembered that he had been "spunky" and almost "killed" somebody; and somehow this tender-hearted little gentleman felt as if his day would begin better if he could get that unpleasant memory off his mind. So he slipped out of bed, threw his nightshirt into one corner of the room, soused the water in the bowl all over the floor, in his vain effort to make it answer for the tubbing to which he was accustomed, tried to straighten his curly tangles of hair with two strokes of the brush, then to button his shoes on the wrong feet, and gave up the

matter as satisfactorily settled by leaving both unfastened, put his knickerbockers on wrong side before with a goodly protuberance of shirt waist to protest against the arrangement, and hied himself out of the room.

As he passed a little chamber under the stairs, he heard the familiar snore of Fritz the elder, and was about to run back and get a pillow to hurl at him. It was a kind of awakening to which both the Fritzes were accustomed, in their loving equality of playfellows, but for once Fritz, junior, refrained.

Not from the slightest hesitation about disturbing his guardian, but because it would hinder him from finding and apologizing to Melville. He was in a great hurry to get that job off his hands; then he would be free to hunt up that donkey who lived with his pretty aunt, and ask his permission to be ridden.

Melville was in a refreshing sleep. His feeble body needed it as much as his tired brain, for half of the invalid's crossness came, had his relatives but known it, from a restlessness of mind which needed to be understood before it

could be cured. There had never been any one about him to understand it; so the crippled lad had lain month in and month out weaving his fancies to himself, and disdaining to confide them to any other, as one shrinks from trusting a perfectly and freshly ripened cluster of grapes to the careless fingers of a child, lest its delicate bloom be lost before its beauty becomes known.

Out of his dreamless rest he was awakened by the touch of a little hand.

"Wake up, you poor crippler, can't you! I want to tell you I — Say, can't you wake up?"

Fritz had stiffened the grasp of his fingers to a painful clutch; and he had yet to learn that Melville was habitually "sore all over," outwardly as well as within.

The clutch succeeded where the gentler touch had failed, and the sick lad opened his eyes with such suddenness that his disturber fairly jumped.

"What the dickens are you doing here again?" roared Melville.

Fritz trembled. Still, he did not retreat; he was far too much in earnest.

"I come — I come —" began the child, and

paused, confused. He somehow found this humiliation of himself vastly harder than any of the many similar confessions he had previously made. He was accustomed to having his "I'm sorrys" met more than half way by the friendly interpretation of love.

But there was no love in the scowling brow upon the pillow, and only a very present memory of the indignity which its owner had suffered.

"Yes, I see you've 'come.' Why? That's what I want to know!" thundered the invalid.

"What is it, Melville? Did you call me, darling?" sleepily asked Grandmothers Capers, coming to the doorway; and Fritz's ready attention was drawn away from his cousin to her.

He looked; he stared; and as he stared his eyes grew bigger and bigger, which was quite unnecessary, since they were very round and wide open at all times. He had never seen any such person, and instantly he decided that the old lady was the "Witch of Endor," about whom his guardian was continually talking when things went wrong in his great business house. "The 'Witch of Endor' is to pay!" was Uncle Fritz's

most vehement expression; and little Fritz thought that this must be she, and he did not at all wonder that big Fritz dreaded her.

His feet began to shake in their ill-adjusted shoes, and, if his hair had not been so well deluged by those two dabs of the brush and bath water, it might have stood upright.

Melville saw the growing consternation on the childish face before him, and turned from it to its cause. Then he did not even attempt to restrain the disrespectful laugh which followed.

Grandmother Capers was one of those saving old ladies who do not wear their false teeth when asleep; and as by daylight she wore both "upper" and "under," and as her features were of the sort described as hooked, the economy resulted in an undress, and sinister appearance, which was at least an unlucky transformation. Add to that the fact that she was also one of the fast fading race who cling to a combination of false-front and black silk skull-cap draped with lace by day, in lieu of their own silver locks, the effect when this regalia was laid aside added one more factor to a get-up which Fritz did not

find attractive. Then, being of slender build and sensitive temperament, she always found it convenient to sleep wrapped in one shawl; and, owing to the undue exposure of the night just gone, she had put on a second, of rich color and great amplitude. Below all trailed a heavy dressing-gown which was summer and winter bedfellow to shawl number one.

Melville was on the point of retorting to her usual fond inquiry: "No, I didn't 'call you darling!'" but one of those rare glimpses of humor which proved him, after all, to be something of a Kinsolving and relative to Ruth, averted the sharp retort. For the first time in his life he saw his doting grandmother as other people saw her; or might see her, if they were admitted to the close intimacy which was his.

"For goodness sake, grandmother! Haven't you what you call a 'Bay State' shawl?"

"Yes. And I suppose you think I ought to have it on." She laughed gaily, in relief from the usual reprimand and appreciation of their mutual wit.

But to the little foreigner the laugh was more

terrible than Melville's frown had been. His chin dropped, and something very like a quiver swept over the brave red lips.

Melville's gaze had returned to his cousin's face by then, and an impish impulse seized him. He would make Fritz kiss Grandmother Capers! The child evidently regarded her with some inexplicable terror, and this would be a punishment complete and well-deserved.

"Come here a minute, grandma."

The loving creature obeyed the summons swiftly, glad of his unusual gentleness, and in her feeble haste stumbled continually upon her long train. This gave her the hobbling gait which was the one touch needed to make her, in Fritz's eyes, the so much dreaded "Endor woman."

"I want you to kiss this sweet little boy. He is an early visitor, and so devoted, you see!"

Melville's laugh, saying this, was harsh, but that Mrs. Capers did not observe. She only knew that Melville laughed. She was ready to do anything he asked of her. So she followed after the child, who slowly retreated, and bent her face to touch his.

"Kiss me, little man. Come, kiss me good-morning."

Kiss the "Witch of Endor!" It was dreadful enough to know she really lived, and right here in his own grandmother's house; but — kiss her! Before the horror of that rite the stalwart soul of the "little man" appeared to die within him. He tried to retreat still farther, and found himself prevented by the barrier of a wall. He darted his terrified glance this way and that for some way of escape, but the pale morning light showed nothing clearly. Else would the still bright eyes of Grandmother Capers have seen what they did not see, that the child's hesitation was not shyness but fear; and even for Melville's dear sake she would not have done what she did do.

Fritz felt the frill of her night-cap brush his hair, then her peppermint-scented breath reached his nostrils, and, with a shriek as if all the witches ever known to history were upon him, he struck out in his own defence.

Melville, even, had looked for no such result as this. At the most, he expected to see "a little

fun"; but his knowledge of healthy boyhood was slight, and a boy who, small as this one was, had yet pluck enough to protect himself from the aggressions even of "witches" was amazing to him.

Needless to say that poor Mrs. Capers was far more astonished than her grandson, and with a more serious cause. As the first blow of the sturdy little fist fell on her unsuspecting cheek, she started and staggered back. Then came a second blow, and she retreated *still* farther; but her aged feet caught in the folds of her long gown, and she was thrown violently to the floor.

For a moment chaos reigned.

Fritzy's fighting blood was up. "St. George and the Dragon" and "Ralph the Lion Killer" were nothing to him. He, who all unarmed and unsuspecting, had met and conquered Uncle Fritz's "Witch of Endor!" Would n't Fritzy Nunky be a proud and happy man when she should be safely out of the way, and no longer "to pay!" At this thought the whacking blows redoubled, and it was only owing to Grandmother Capers's well wrapped person that she was not

then and there annihilated, as her adversary, forsooth, intended.

Meanwhile, Melville lay helpless on his bed and hollaed. The game had gone to terrifying limits, and he was powerless to stop it, save by his lusty voice; which, for awhile, seemed rather to egg on the small pugilist than to restrain him.

Fortunately for all concerned, Content was also an early riser; and this one morning in especial she had been "up with the lark," that she might help Aunt Ruth, rightly foreseeing that the sudden invasion of a whole flock of hungry youngsters would make breakfast-getting a task for many hands.

As she entered the passage which ran by the apartments devoted to the Caperses, the sound of Melville's voice reached her. She was used already to hearing it pitched in the most disagreeable of tones, but there was something in these roars out of the common. She had heard him quarrelling with his grandmother, and, after intrusion on one such scene, had learned to take herself as far away as possible before witnessing another. Under all her gentleness, there was

still enough of the old Kinsolving "substance" left in Content's veins to make her wholly sympathize with Aunt Ruth's views concerning Melville Capers's treatment of his grandmother.

She paused an instant; then, arrested by the difference in the "roar," the next she had pushed open the door and come upon the conflict. What it meant she could not guess; but what it was she saw only too plainly. With one bound she had caught up Fritz in her arms, and was holding the struggling child from further mischief.

But he was not minded to be so restrained. "Let me go! Let me go, you great girl, you!"

"Hush! Melville, stop calling, and tell me what it means," answered Content, heedless of Fritz's violent struggles but finding herself almost incompetent to control them.

"But I must call. There must somebody come. You can't hold that infernal little beast and help grandma too. Ruth — Aunt Ruth! Grandmother! Somebody!!"

Grandmother Capers, feeling that she was no longer being assaulted, ventured to raise her

head. "Don't mind me, darling. I — I 'm not hurt much, I — I think." But the feebleness of her tone denied her statement, and with a new distress Content saw that the poor old lady's nose was bleeding.

The sight of the scarlet flow he had caused for a moment incited Fritz to fresh struggles and fresh exhibitions of prowess. Truly, it had been reserved for the last of his race to be the fighter amongst them! Another moment and he realized that this was the sweet-faced new cousin Content who was holding him, and that Aunt Ruth had said of her that she "was very, very lovely in her mind, as well as in her person."

The weather-cock curiosity of childhood veered on the instant. He ceased kicking, but none too soon for the girlish strength he had taxed so severely, and improved his chance to scrutinize the features so near his own. Aunt Ruth had told him about Content, during that sleepy, undressing talk of the night before.

"How do you know that she is pretty in her mind, too?" he had asked.

"Because her mind shows through her face,"

Aunt Ruth had answered; and now he had an excellent opportunity to see where. Not that he supposed his cousin's face would be really transparent, but he believed it must be different from that of others. The only difference he found, however, was in the singular clearness and gentleness of her expression.

Content saw that for some reason she had gained his momentary attention, and she followed up her advantage. "Go quickly, and call Aunt Ruth. If you cannot find her bring somebody—the first person you can see." Then she sat him down upon the floor, still wistfully regarding him lest this strange combination of tenderness and wrath, in the form of a boy, should develop some new and more untoward quality as well.

But she need not have feared. Beside the quiet command of her eye, his ear had caught the words: "Are you badly hurt, poor grandma?" uttered in a sympathetic voice by the "roaring crippler," and he was completely at sea. So he walked slowly out of the room, but less in obedience to her wish than because he was puzzling to understand how this Melville, who was

his own cousin and lived here in America, could by any possibility be the grandson of the "Witch of Endor," who, he was perfectly sure, belonged by good rights at his uncle's great book shop in Munich. So perplexed, indeed, was he by this problem that he walked straight into the legs of portly "Fritzy Nunky."

"Hey, small sir! And so after waking up thy poor guardian with thy noisy racing over the stairs thou wouldst walk him down like a nine-pin! Hey?" The jolly uncle swung his nephew to his shoulder, and marched away through the passage to the open door at its end.

When they came to the sunlight, he cried, "And pray where was thy valet this morning? Surely, there is something out of common with this!" The great hand caught hold of the escaping waist frill and tucked it into hiding.

"But, Fritzy Nunky, I forgot. They want you, the folks do. The roaring crippler, and the lovely-minded girl, and the 'Witch of Endor.' I reckon I've about settled *her*, though! So you won't have her no more 'to pay.' Ain't you awful glad?"

By many unfortunate experiences Uncle Fritz had learned that he could not always rejoice when called upon to do so by his small nephew, and he promptly inquired, with some misgiving, "What do you mean, child?"

Fritz, junior, recognized the change from the tender "thou" to the sterner "you," which with his guardian "meant business," and he answered, instantly:

"I've pounded the old woman in there pretty hard, I reckon; and the girl said for you to come quick."

"O Fritzy! more mischief?" demanded the uncle, reproachfully. Then he put the little boy down and ordered him to lead the way.

So Mr. Fritz Pickel's introduction to old lady Capers was made under circumstances which neither that devotee of conventionality nor the courteous gentleman would have preferred. But one glance of his keen eyes showed him that the case was far too serious for any ceremony, and the expression of them as they rested upon the strangely attired and prostrate figure was one that his little nephew never forgot.

CHAPTER VII.

IT was a very grave and tear-bedimmed little lad who sat on his guardian's knee. It had been a gentle but earnest talk which had caused the tears; and somehow the boy understood well just what it was in his behavior which had so troubled Fritzy Nunky's heart, "down deep."

The trouble had not been just the same as that one about the untruth; but it had come nearest to that of any emotion the dear face had ever shown.

"You see, don't you, little man?"

"Yes — I see," Fritz made answer, between those long, swelling sobs which are so distressing to the child lover. "It's this here way: I am a good boy, and you know I am a good boy. An' you want these new folks to know I ain't a reg'lar fighter, but I'm pretty good. But you see, it don't — it is n't — I could n't, — well, I could n't just help pitchin' into that Melville. I

did n't do it for ugly, but I could n't 'pear to help it, nohow! I hope I don't want to do it again; but if I do, how 'm I goin' to help it? It 's the quickness inside of me that makes my fists go double up. It is 'nt — me!"

"How, then, art thou going to prove to these kinsfolk that it is n't 'me?' I fear the dear grandmother thinks it is the real 'me'; and I am sure the Aunt Ruth does."

"But can't you make her understand diff 'runt? Could n't you tell her how good I am, Fritzy Nunky?" asked the unhappy child, coaxingly.

"Be sure I will do that. But how am I to make it seem real to her? Thou wilt have to make her understand that — I cannot. Fritzy Nunky does know about the good heart, and the fair intentions; but if they do not show on the outside, what then?"

The question was too deep for little Fritz. He waived it, asking another: —

"Who is the 'Witch of Endor?' I ain't a-going to fight her no more, you bet!"

Uncle Fritz smiled, but not very happily. "She was a very wise old lady who lived in

ancient times." Then, thinking to disabuse the lad's mind of mistaken notions, he added: "She must have been a kindly soul, too; for when the King Saul, — a man who fought, and intended to fight, so was not like my boy, — when this fighting king came to her, though she was afraid he would kill her, yet she made him a dinner of her fatted calf and a wheaten cake."

"Calf? That's veal, is n't it? Suppose it was a veal pot-pie, like Aunt Ruth had for dinner?"

"Maybe."

"Must ha' been good! And did the fighter have her 'to pay?'"

Poor Uncle Fritz laughed. Then he enlarged upon the good qualities of the ancient dame with "the familiar spirit," hoping to arouse some liking for her in his nephew's breast, and craftily leading the child on to understand that all these excellent things were repeated and strengthened in the present person of Mrs. Margaret Capers.

"But if she was so good, why do you still have her 'to pay?'"

"Because I am a foolish man. I use words

and expressions that I should not. I get vexed when things go wrong, and then I feel I must say something. That expression which has so misled you came most natural; and now, indeed, I do have 'to pay' by seeing what a muddle I have led you into."

There was much more of this talk, during which the guardian did not exempt himself from a generous share of the blame. If he had "had more wisdom" his charges would have made a better showing on their first appearance at their new home, and not have appeared so much like a lot of "untrained savages." Consequently, their reception would have been more cordial.

For it must be confessed that the friendly Aunt Ruth had not treated her younger nephew with much consideration after his second pugilistic exploit. She did not care to have history repeat itself in that way. It was one thing when the victim was that exasperating Melville, and quite another when a frail old lady was the sufferer. She had not said very much, and therein congratulated herself for being unusually prudent; but, as Fritz had expressed it, "she had looked with

her eyes" in a way that meant volumes, and "talking eyes" had been the one thing he had ever feared most. Uncle Fritz "talked eyes" when he was the most deeply aggrieved; and little Fritz found it most unpleasant to have an American relative addicted to the same bad habit.

She came into the room just then and there, and, seeing the two Fritzes in such confidential discussion, would have speedily withdrawn, had not the gentleman risen and begged her to remain. It was as good a time as another to explain how matters really were.

So Aunt Ruth sat down and listened patiently; but with an unbelieving manner which hurt the kindly German far more than she dreamed.

"Yes, I doubt not they are excellent children, as children go; but I have had little experience."

Mr. Pickel smiled.

"Your tone indicates that you have still had all that you desire —"

"No, no; thee must not say that, nor think it," interrupted the lady quickly. "They are my sister's children. It is right that I should be bothered with them, as well as that thee should

be. Thee has certainly had thy share of their care."

"Please do not look at it in that light, dear Fräulein. It is not the care that I dislike; indeed, that I never feel. It is that you and your mother should misjudge my children, and not understand how really good and delightful they are. Fritzy, now—" Here Ruth intercepted a grateful glance which the child raised to his uncle's face, and could not fail to be touched by it. "Fritzy is a wonderfully obedient and honorable child."

"Fritzy" began to prick up his ears; but he let them droop, so to speak, at sound of his aunt's expressive "Humph!" But he was very tired of the whole subject, and longed to make an end of it. It was already afternoon of that day which had opened with such bright anticipations of a new donkey friendship, and all he had been able to accomplish in the way of it was to stand sorrowfully in the door-way of the passage, where Uncle Fritz had bidden him remain, and sigh in sympathy with Don's mournful bray. At that very moment the echo of it came to their ears,

and the boy left his uncle to walk to the window and look out.

Young as he was, Fritzy still hated to make promises, for he had already learned by observation that it is a very difficult matter to keep them. But he suddenly determined to run the risk of one, thinking by that means to cut short this wearisome talk and his own imprisonment, as well as bring back the right kind of a smile to his pretty aunt's face. So he walked toward her, watching her eyes intently, and was relieved to find them "talking" no longer, or only in a gentle way.

"Aunt Ruth, I won't never fight anybody any more. Truly, never."

"That is a rash thing to say, Fritzy; how about the 'quickness inside of you?'" asked his guardian, cautiously.

"Oh, I s'pose it 'll bother me like ginger; but if I say I won't, I won't; will I, uncle?"

"I think he is to be trusted, Fräulein," testified that witness.

Ruth stooped down and raised Fritzy to her lap.

"Listen, little one; we are Friends — Quakers

— in this household. Our yea is yea, and our nay, nay. Thee is Quaker, too, on thy mother's side, and I am going to believe it is she who speaks through thee. Now thee may kiss me and go to Don."

"I hope he will not be tempted to break his word," commented Aunt Ruth, as the lad disappeared like a flash through the open doorway.

"He may be tempted, but he will not break it," answered Uncle Fritz, quietly.

"Thee speaks strongly, and he is — such a child."

"Because he is — *such* a child, dear Fräulein. They are all dear and delightful, but little Fritz, — he is my one 'sweet pickle.'"

Smiling at this very evident truth, Aunt Ruth, with a greatly relieved heart, followed "little Fritz."

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHAT is it, Paula?" demanded Octave. "You look as if you had been taking a dose of castor oil."

"Hateful boy!" said Paula.

"Who?"

"That Melville Capers. He's as horrid as —"

"As a boy. You can't compare him to anything worse," laughed the younger girl.

"All boys cannot be like him, or grown-up folks would n't endure them. They 'd imprison them somewhere till they learned decency. I shall have nothing more to do with him!"

"Why, Paula! Lose all the honor of reconstructing him? You, the head of the family? What did he do or say? What are you mad at?"

"I 'm not mad. It is an unladylike word."

"Pooh! You 're as mad as a March hare, or a hornet, or a bear with a so —"

"Octave Pickel! I should think you would be ashamed of yourself! A young lady fourteen years old using such coarse expressions!"

"A young lady sixteen years old giving occasion to me to use them! Paula Pickel, I should think you would be ashamed of yourself! You would if you knew how you were looking at this very minute."

"Why? What?" asked the elder girl, anxiously, rising and crossing to the tiny mirror. "I do wish Aunt Ruth would let us have something bigger than this to use! It 's so small that I cannot see more than half of my head at one time!"

"Do as I do," laughed Octave; "dress yourself before the wardrobe door." And suiting the action to the word, the merry girl placed herself in front of the door in question and gravely began to brush and freshen her long, tangled hair.

She had finished and had put on a clean gown, ready for the supper table, for which her healthy appetite was also ready, long before Paula had ceased twisting and turning about before the little glass to see what was amiss with herself.

"I don't see anything, Octave. What was it that was wrong?" she cried, as her sister went dancing and singing out of the room. "Stop, and do tell me!"

"I dare n't!"

"Why?"

"You 'd say, 'Octave, Octave!' in that reproachful tone of yours; and how should I ever bear it?"

"Oh, you —"

"Darling,— I know it; I realize it. Seriously, sweetheart, there was nothing wrong with your appearance, only —"

"Only what? Do tell me. I don't want to go down stairs looking like —"

"Like your careless sister Octave! It 's only what Fritzy says about Content: the 'lovely mind showing through her face'; so it was with you, heart's dearest!"

And laughing at the renewed disgust in her victim's countenance, Octave ran away. She could no more forbear teasing somebody than she could doing the hundred and one other useless things which were the result of her overflowing

life. Paula was dear, really; but Paula was such fun! And poor Paula herself was just sufficiently conscious of her own shortcomings to make her doubly sensitive to others' raillery.

Only those shortcomings did not lie in the direction she supposed; and they did lie just in the road Octave had suggested. Paula bewailed her occasional lack of dignity, her lapses from correctness of speech, her ignorance of style, and any other slight flaw in a character she was really accustomed to think a bit above par.

Full of herself, and full of plans, she had gone that afternoon to sit with her cousin Melville. The family project for improving that disagreeable invalid had been held in abeyance by the condition of poor Mrs. Capers, who, for a fortnight, had been drooping and under the doctor's care, while her charge was almost wholly neglected by that good man.

The fright her ghastly face and fainting condition had given Mr. Pickel, after his nephew had "paid her" for her supposed resemblance to the "Witch of Endor," had abated as the day wore on, and her injuries had appeared not to be seri-

ous. And, afterward, she had seemed not really ill, but simply not as usual.

In the secret of her own heart she believed that she had "got her warning"; and when, one day, the physician had ordered her to go to bed "for a bit," she had felt that she was obeying him forever.

Oddly enough, yet perhaps not really so oddly after all, the old lady had taken a fancy that of all the household little Christina should attend her few wants. Paula she would not see on any pretext, and Octave she found too noisy. Content had taken her own place at Melville's bedside, and this was how she would have had it, since Content would bear in silence what the others would resent in anger.

Aunt Ruth was busy, always, with the needs of such a family, and gentle Amy Kinsolving's strength would allow of her doing no more than go from room to room of the well-filled Snuggery, "carrying sunshine" and words of good-cheer.

But this day there seemed to be a lull in the rush of affairs, and Paula thought that she could

do two benevolent things at once. Unfortunately, few, however skilful, do "kill two birds with one stone"; and Paula was most unskilled. Her missionary spirit was of the warlike kind; and, as she would have said to a tropical heathen, "You must read your Bible and wear these clothes," so she started in to reform Melville by feeling that it rested with her to *make* him do what she considered fitting.

Now, nobody, big or little, on this earth likes to be what Fritz called "musted." Even Content felt a disinclination to leave her post at the cripple's side, since they had found that in their mutual love of Dickens and his magic they could meet on happy ground. The girl's musical voice was just picturing, with a pathos her sympathy made real, the death-scene of little Paul Dombey, and both reader and listener were steeped in sorrow for the loss of one who was a real personage to them, when the door opened and Paula, crisp and rattling in her freshly starched skirts, entered.

To sensitive Melville, the effect was as if she had struck him; while Content felt as deep if a quieter disappointment.

"I've come to sit with you, Melville; and Content, you are to go right out and have a game of tennis. Aunt Ruth says this moping indoors is n't good for you."

"Tennis! Alone? And I'm not moping at all. We were having a real good time; were n't we, Melville?"

"We were; but it's over!"

"Oh, no, indeed; it is n't over. If Aunt Ruth wished me to go out of doors, I am sure it was because she thought I must be tired. But I'm not tired; I'd rather read Dickens than play tennis."

"Why, Content Kinsolving! Here you have been held up to us as a shining example, and you are, after all, what even little Fritz would disdain to be, — disobedient!"

"Paula! Did Aunt Ruth really say I was to go out?" asked Content, with her color rising.

Now, Ruth had said nothing of the kind. What she had remarked was that she wished Content cared more for such healthful games as this — to her — new one of lawn tennis, which had been introduced at The Snuggery along with the pony-

cart, the archery outfit, the photographic camera, and the various other amusements which that most indulgent man, "Fritzy Nunky," provided for his charges.

However, Paula felt herself warranted in interpreting the spirit of her aunt's words in a fashion to suit herself. She was bent on missionizing; and she silenced any misgivings of her own conscience by the conclusion that the end justified the means. Though her face flushed with guilty shame at the lie she was acting, she did not distinctly answer; but the air of injured innocence with which she took her place by the foot of Melville's lounge said more than speech; — she, Paula, was not accustomed to have her word doubted; if Content was suspicious enough to mistrust her, why she was above resentment; as for her, she always did her duty, whether other people did or not. All this was conveyed to quick-witted Content by the simple manner in which Paula spread out her dress, tossed her fair head, and quietly took her seat.

Poor Content was far from being an example, or even a "lovely-minded girl," at that moment.

She did not remember to have ever been so angry in her life. And yet, since there had been no word uttered, there could be nothing to contest. For once she felt that she would enjoy a good squabble — it would have been such a relief to her feelings. But one glance into Melville's darkening eyes and frowning brow convinced her that she could safely leave the matter in his hands; and it was with a satisfaction which proved her to be most humanly erring that the girl laid down her book and went away.

"Deliver me from a saint!"

"What?" sweetly asked Paula. Having carried her point she was in a most complacent mood.

"I said, — Deliver me from a saint! That's you! Do you hear? Understand?"

"Yes, I hear; but I do not mind it. You are so ill that you are scarcely responsible for what you say. I mean" — for she suddenly recollected that she was about to lecture her cousin on his wretched lack of self-control, and was contradicting herself beforehand — "I mean, that although you are hard to get along with, I at least have sympathy with you."

"Hang your sympathy!" retorted its ungrateful recipient.

Paula paid no heed. "Shall I go on reading where Content left off?"

"No!" thundered this lad of the mighty voice. "It would be sacrilege."

"What do you mean?" asked Paula, forgetting for an instant the rôle of angel she had intended to play.

"I mean that it is n't such a prig as you who can understand Dickens!"

"Prig is a word to apply to boys, Cousin Melville."

"To girls, also, when they make nuisances of themselves."

Paula bit her lip; but she conquered her temper by holding up to mental view the wonderful good she was determined to accomplish even by means of the falsehold she had acted. It would be so delightful, when she had converted Melville from the error of his ways by sheer force of her own perfection, to hear her friends say, "That is all dear Paula's work. Melville was a thoroughly disagreeable boy when Paula took him in hand.

We owe so much to Paula." And almost hearing these laudatory phrases, so keenly did she imagine them, she turned again toward her victim with the question, "If you are tired of Dickens, what would you have me read?"

"Nothing. If you read as you talk, it would be unendurable to me. Why do you clip off the ends of your words in such a fashion? This is n't a 'woom,' and that is n't a 'wockin'-chai-ah!'"

Now, if there was anything about herself of which Paula was more proud than another, it was her sweet and well-trained voice. Her modulation was exquisite, and it really pleased Melville; but because he saw that it was a weak point with his cousin he selected it as an object of ridicule.

Paula waited till she had counted ten twice over, before she ventured to speak. Then she ignored Melville's attack and asked, "What would you like me to do, then, if you do not wish me to read?"

"Clear out."

"Melville Capers, you are no gentleman!"

"You are no saint, so you need n't pose for one!"

"I do not pose."

"You do. You came in here with that sanctimonious look on your face, — though a lie in your heart, — as if you thought yourself a little better than all the world, and were fully determined that all the world should know it."

The sneer which cuts deepest is the sneer which has a bit of truth in it.

Poor Paula eyes filled. She did not find the work of missionizing so much to her taste as she had fancied, and it is certain that she could not have selected a more difficult subject to try her hand upon.

Melville was shrewd and clever. Paula was clever, but not at all shrewd. The boy did not know, of course, about the family project of his reconstruction, but he was quick to scent out Paula's motive for preaching to him.

"See here," he said testily; "we might as well make an end of this business before it is begun. I am shut in here, and cannot do much for myself; but what I can do I will — you bet! And one of these things is that I can say who shall and who shall not inflict their society upon me.

These rooms belong to my grandmother and me as much as the rest of the house does to Grandmother Kinsolving. There is one class on which I shall always have the door shut, — the class of saints. It is unfortunate that you should belong to it; but, since you do, the deduction is obvious."

If Paula had had any doubt as to his meaning, it was removed by the very significant glance her cousin cast upon the door. With burning cheeks, and feeling as if she would never again try any missionary work, she rose and walked away. As she reached the door, Melville called after her: "If you see Content, or even the little fighter, send them in. It's horrid lonesome."

There was no reply, and as her footsteps died away Melville judged, and rightly, that his message would not be delivered. Paula went straight to her room, and to her teasing sister Octave, to go through the familiar trial of the younger girl's gibing tongue just when she was most ill-fitted to endure it.

It was an hour after Octave had left her, and after poor Paula had relieved her anger by a fit of weeping, that she smoothed her ruffled feathers

once more and went below stairs. She expected a word of reproof from her punctual Aunt Ruth for her late appearance at table, but to her surprise the supper-room was unoccupied. The meal had evidently been going on, and had been interrupted by some unusual occurrence; for the plates showed half-eaten food, napkins had fallen in uncommon places, and the disarranged chairs proved that the family had left the apartment in haste.

Paula walked to the door and looked out. There was not a person in sight; neither was there anything but the absence of human life to give her occasion for anxiety; yet a feeling of uneasiness stole over her, which, had she been as nervous as Mrs. Capers, she would have called a "presentiment" of some mischance.

After a moment of searching the lawn for any sign of the family, she fancied that she could detect the outlines of a group of people in a distant field, which was almost hidden from the house by a thick grove; she raised her clear voice and shouted, "Octave! Christina! Uncle Fritz!"

But only the echo of her own cries came back to her from the surrounding hill-tops.

CHAPTER IX.

DIVIDED between curiosity and hunger, Paula stood for some seconds deliberating whether she should go to join the group of people in the distant field or eat her supper. She finally decided upon a compromise, and, carefully spreading a delicate slice of bread, she made a sandwich of it by adding a bit of boiled ham, and thus fortified for any emergency she left the house.

She walked rapidly, at the same time casting furtive glances about lest somebody should see her "unladylike" performance of taking her supper "on the fly," as was the habit of harum-scarum Octave. But no one observed her, or would have been at all shocked had they done so; and when the sandwich was finished the girl quickened her steps to a run, and reached her family in a breathless state unusual with her.

It was a scene of confusion upon which she came so hurriedly; but her first exclamation was one of relief: "Oh, it is only Octave!"

"Only Octave!" spoke volumes. It showed how familiar the elder sister had become with that unlucky maiden's misfortunes; which were, indeed, even one degree more frequent than those of little Fritz, and he appeared — according to his Aunt Ruth's fancy — to exist merely for the sake of tumbling out of one scrape into another. That Octave had not before this displayed her aptitude for disaster was due to the fact that provocation for such was rare at the peaceful Snuggery.

"'Only Octave!' but she has about done for herself, this time," replied Uncle Fritz. He sat on the ground, holding his niece in his arms, looking very anxious but very red and heated as well. He was too stout to make the swift run he did without suffering for it, and Paula stooped down and offered to take his place in supporting the girl who lay so still and white before them all.

Even in the midst of her anxiety Aunt Ruth noticed Paula's action, and was more pleased by it than she was accustomed to be by that "young lady's" ways. It showed a consideration and sisterliness which, in her first hasty estimate of

"Miss Pickel's" character, the aunt had believed to be entirely wanting.

Grandmother Kinsolving stood at a little distance from the group, resting against Content, while Christina and Fritzy hugged each other in a terror of some great grief.

"What is it all about?" asked Paula, anxiously, bending to see if Octave was not beginning to breathe again, and even then shrinking a trifle from the streams of water with which Uncle Fritz, with a liberal impartiality, was deluging his unconscious niece and all who surrounded her.

"I reckon it was this here way," replied the farmer, Abraham Tewksbury, who managed the farm for the Kinsolvings; "I was a-lettin' the team stand whilst I run back ter shet the bars. This 'ere was the last load I was a-goin' ter tackle ternight, an' the boys hed gone on ter the barn ter commence milkin'. I 'lowed to 'em 't I could git the load in alone; an' so I could, ef—" Here the narrator cast a glance, half angry, half sorry, at the victim of her own good-will. "But Octavy, here, she come a-tearin' out the house an' down here, like she was possessed. 'Lemme drive the

horses, Abryham,' sez she. I told her she 'd a-better not; 'cause one on 'em was kinder coltish, an' not used ter strange drivers. But she 'd got her head sot, an' whilst I was gone ter the bars up she clumb onter the hay-riggin' an' grabbed the reins. Fust I knowed, I heered her holler, an' then she give a sort of Injun warwhoop; an' then she snatched a whistle out her pocket an' begun ter blow it. I yelled to her ter stop. That off mare she was scairt once at a band, an' she hain't never fergot it; but Octavy, she uther did n't hear me, er less she warn't afraid, for she kep' right on a-blowin'. Next I knowed, thar she was an' the hull load o' hay a-top of her, an' the horses broke loose an' runnin' like Jehuwhittaker!"

Abraham paused for want of breath, and all eyes were gladdened by the signs of returning consciousness which poor Octave showed. She had been stunned and almost smothered by her fall, and the hay which fell with her. It had been Abraham Tewksbury's lusty yells which had roused the family from their supper talk, and then they had all flown to the scene of the accident. By the time they reached it the farmer had caught

and unhitched the team, and leaving them to find their own way stableward had vigorously set to work to toss the hay from off the girl, and to see if she were yet alive. That she should escape with her life, after being dragged half the length of the great meadow, seemed to him little short of a miracle.

"I s'pose it was the hay 't saved her. No, I don't nuther. It was Providence. Nothin' else on the face o' the airth!" he had ejaculated fervently.

"Thee is right, Abraham. The Providence who watches over all His children," said Grandmother Kinsolving, quietly. Even in that supreme moment of anxiety which her pallor showed her to be suffering, the outward serenity of Mother Amy's face remained sweet and undisturbed, and Ruth wondered if anything could ever find her distrustful or afraid.

At a motion from Ruth's hand, Uncle Fritz ceased racing to and fro between the brookside and the fainting Octave, and waited while she opened her eyes and looked wearily about her. Then he darted off for a horse and disappeared in search of the doctor.

When she could talk, Octave assured her anxious friends that she was "not hurt but scared"; but when she attempted to raise herself on her elbow she sank back with a groan, and the slowly returning color vanished anew from her face.

"Do ye think it would hurt ye very bad ef I should carry ye ter the house, Octavy?" asked Abraham, kindly.

"I hate — to move," answered the poor girl, faintly.

"Yis, I don't doubt it, not in the least; but ye know ye carn't lay there all night, an' I guess my carryin' on ye won't hurt ye so much as 't would ter be took some other way."

The others agreed with Mr. Tewksbury, and after one more protest from the injured girl, he lifted her in his strong arms and set out carefully for the house. The family followed slowly, Aunt Ruth's face worn and terrified, as she saw that the motion, gentle as it was, made her niece sink into another faint. She tried to recall something of the peacefulness of her life before these "pickles" came into it; and Melville's ill-temper and selfishness appeared almost angelic by contrast.

It was just a month since that fateful telegram had exploded in their midst, and already it seemed to the young mistress like a lifetime. A month — and Fritz, senior, had had the care of these children for years! How had he ever managed and yet retain his jollity? He not only endured them, but he seemed actually wretched at the thought of his long journey into South America, which would take him away from them for a few weeks. Then the thought recurred of his advice about Melville: "Just love him." Ah! it must be this "just loving" that made all the difference.

"I would love them, too; I should be glad to — if they would only keep still long enough!" ejaculated the perplexed woman.

Fritzy heard her, and was glad to have the silence broken.

"What did you say, Aunt Ruthy?"

"I said — O Fritzy! Is something always happening to thee or thy sisters? Is there no such thing as quiet any more?"

The child looked gravely into the troubled face above him. "Why, yes, Auntie; I am quiet, ain't I? They ain't nothin' 'happened' to me

this whole, endurin' day. Now, Octave, she's settled; an' Paula, she don't never do anything not ezactly proper, so Fritzy Nunky says. Christina does n't do anything bad at all. I reckon it 'll be all right, Aunt Ruthy, now."

Ruth smiled. Yet he comforted her also, for there was such a world of affection in his big blue eyes, as he lifted them to her troubled face, that her heart warmed to him. After all, though they were so vexatious, these "mixed pickles" left by her dead sister for some one to care for, did, as Uncle Fritz had predicted, "season" her life with a new interest. She would not exactly like to part with them just yet.

But her thoughts were interrupted by their arrival at the house, and the preparations for getting Octave made comfortable in her own bedchamber.

Then the doctor came and examined the suffering girl, and reported, as a result of her prank, a broken arm and a badly sprained ankle. "And it is well she has escaped, even at that cost; she could not take a similar risk again and come out of it alive," added the physician gravely.

Uncle Fritz was to have gone away on the morrow, but this accident deferred his departure; and over that the whole household rejoiced so heartily as almost to lose sight of the cause of the delay.

Octave herself helped them to forget. The same exuberance of life that carried her into one scrape after another, served to sustain her under any trial. A night's rest set her nerves all straight, and her healthy body suffered less than another's might have done. So long as she obeyed orders and lay perfectly still, she was comparatively free from pain, and she had not been crippled for a day before she began making plans for her own comfort and that of every one else.

"Now, you see, Aunt Ruth, that there is no use in having this pretty room of yours all in a muddle, as it is sure to be if I stay in it; besides, grandma does n't get her nap as she ought to do with me so close to her room, and all the 'pickles' running in and out, as they do. Just you have my cot rolled into Melville's sitting-room, and I 'll stay there days. Nights I can sleep in that funny little hall outside of it, which I think is the prettiest

place in the whole house. Then, you see, the one who takes care of Melville, or hears him grumble, will have to hear me too, — lump it."

"Thee does n't know Melville as well as I do, dear Octave, or thee would never propose such an arrangement as that."

"Pooh! — I don't mean that for you, Aunt Ruth, but for him! If you all treated his royal highness to a little more 'pooh!' and a little less 'please!' he 'd be a more self-respecting boy. Try it, anyhow, won't you? I can't hurt him very much, now I 've got myself tied down to this bed of roses. Try it, and I 'll lose my guess if I don't do him good."

Ruth laughed. Octave's cheeriness surprised and greatly pleased her. Not even illness seemed to affect the merry girl's spirit, and she was quite inclined to accept her proposition. The more so as Grandmother Kinsolving was the idol of her daughter's heart, and Octave had hit the nail very squarely on the head in saying that the old lady's rest would of necessity be greatly lessened by having Ruth's adjoining room occupied "as a hospital." Mother Amy was frail at the best;

and, before these Pickels came, her health had been the one anxiety and care of the young housekeeper.

"Thee is a thoughtful child, Octave. I am half-minded to give thy notion a trial."

The injured girl's face brightened still more. "I did not know that you ever had a 'half-mind,' Aunt Ruthy. You look always decided enough to have a great, big, sound, and whole one, with a few 'pieces' to spare. Well, let's get 'Abryham' and I'll 'beard the lion,' and all the rest of it."

"We will hope that 'all the rest of it' will not prove too much for even thy daring soul," replied Aunt Ruth gaily; and as she passed out of the room she paused to give her charge a quiet kiss. This demonstration was rare with the aunt, and little Fritz alone of all his family would not have found it so. Because it was so unusual it was all the more appreciated by its recipient, and Octave banished the last regret she had felt; for, gay as she was, and little as she acknowledged it, there was an unselfishness in her proposal which even Aunt Ruth did not suspect. It was seldom

that Octave appeared to think of herself; but no one had ever observed that this was from any principle. It had rather seemed that the child never had time. She was always flying from one project to another, gay as a bird, and apparently as thoughtless. She certainly was the last one of all the young people whom her aunt, or any other, would have selected as likely to do the peculiar Melville any good.

"Abry-ham" came promptly, glad to be of use. His fatherly heart had been touched by the heroism with which Octave bore the setting of her broken bones and injured muscles; and even before that he had been won by the frank friendliness of the "young lady," who was said to be a very rich person as far as money went.

Now, there is nothing that the uncultured mind so greatly regards as money; and the airs which Paula manifested were accepted as natural and appertaining to her station in life. If he had thought about the matter at all, Abraham would have considered that he should have done the same as Paula did under similar circumstances; but, even so, he found Octave's simpler ways and

equality of manner preferable. He would never stand in awe of her as he did of her elder sister, but he would do what was far better, — he would love her.

There was pleasure in his honest eyes because he had been summoned to do this service for the injured girl, and the ring of affection in his voice as he entered with his cheery, "Jehuwhittaker! This is how ye make things spin, is it? Don't make no more o' breakin' a bone er two 'an some folks does o' prickin' their finger! Wal, I hope ye 've counted the cost, afore ye set sail ter keep house along o' Melville. He 's a critter 'at likes his own paddock, an' no interference, I tell ye. Ye 're brave enough ter tackle a team o' wild hosses, but ye better think twict afore ye tackle Melville Capers."

"I don't dare think twice, Mr. Abraham; I 'm going right quick, while my first courage lasts. Now don't you or Aunt Ruth say another word, but just wheel ahead! I 'll shut my teeth hard and not groan once, if you do hurt me."

But the well-oiled castors of the little bed ran smoothly, and the wide doorways and corridors

seemed especially made for moving beds about, so Octave fancied; and in a few minutes the passage to Melville's sitting-room was made, his door opened, and Octave's narrow couch pushed in.

The cripple was so astonished that he almost sat upright. "What in thunder!" he exclaimed.

"Good afternoon!" said Octave, merrily.

"What does this mean?"

"That you are not very civil."

Octave made a significant gesture, and both her smiling, anxious attendants withdrew to an invisible distance, leaving the two bed-ridden cousins to stare one another down.

CHAPTER X.

FROM that silent contest of wills Octave came out conqueror. There was no resisting her merry audacity, with its underlying principle to strengthen it, and Melville was the first to speak. He did so in his own peculiar fashion, and his cousin answered after hers.

To her surprise, he did not make himself half so disagreeable as she had expected. It may be that he, too, felt drawn to the high-spirited girl whose whole life was such a contrast to his own; or it may be that his heart was softened by the reports from the apartment of his grandmother, whom he had really loved in his own selfish fashion, even though he had tormented her in so unmanly a manner. Then, too, there was sound common-sense at the bottom of his nature, and he could but see that it was an impossibility for even energetic Aunt Ruth to look after three invalids in as many separate places.

"With Grandmother Amy thrown in for good measure," concluded Octave, quietly.

Twenty-four hours proved the experiment a success, and another twenty-four made Melville wonder how he had ever managed without this new companion, though she did scarcely one thing he desired her to do.

"You've been coddled and babied till you aren't half a boy, Melville Capers; and a good thing it is for you that your grandmother is sick and I have come to take her place. Not a bit of coddling you'll get from me, so you need n't look for it!"

If he fretted, she laughed. If he read sentimental or melancholy poems, as he was given to doing, she repeated Mother Goose. If he praised Dickens, she lauded Scott. If he complained of his cruel portion in life, she ridiculed him and told him it was his own fault.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, after this last seemingly heartless assertion.

"Why, I heard Aunt Ruth say that, if you had not been so afraid of trying heroic treatment when you were little, you might have been cured. Even when you first came here, and that is only three years ago. But you cried, and 'could n't,'

and your poor grandmother loved you so she 'would n't,' and so you have no one to blame for a wasted life but your own cowardly self."

"Octave Pickel! You are rightly named."

"I think so. My family is an honorable one."

"But you are Pickel by name and the sourest kind of a pickle by nature."

"Sharp, not sour. That is, none too sour. It does n't do to have everything sweet — like you."

"I hate you! I want you to go out of this room."

"I can't. The doctor forbids me to walk, or even try."

Melville fixed his eyes upon her face in a long, questioning gaze. Then he gave a great sigh — which was almost a sob. Octave's own look did not falter, and out of the depths of her warm, wholesome heart she echoed the sigh.

"Well, and how — how do you like it?" Melville's question came bitterly, fiercely.

Octave's merry eyes filled with a sympathy that the boy could not fail to see was wholly genuine. "Cousin Melville, I do not like it at all. I can hardly bear it, even for these few days or weeks I

shall have to endure it; and I cannot bear that you should submit to it so tamely. You must not — you shall not!" cried the girl, excitedly.

She understood perfectly, with the electric perception of youth, that the cripple had compared her temporary helplessness with his own, which he supposed incurable. She had been longing to have just this subject come up between them, for down in her heart she had hidden a daring thought.

The thought had been caused by a talk with her Uncle Fritz; which, however, that soft-hearted man had little intention should bear just such fruit.

He had said that he believed the boy could be helped, or that he could have been, by a difficult and painful operation which a celebrated surgeon of his own country, now inspecting the American hospitals, had once successfully performed.

The thought had come like a flash to Octave then and there; and, with a minuteness which her fond uncle thought an admirable thirst for knowledge pure and simple, she had questioned him of the operation in all its details. Now, Mr. Fritz

Pickel always protested that a famous surgeon had been lost to the world when his father had apprenticed him to business; and it was his recreation, still, to "walk the hospitals" with his many friends among the doctors, and he would grow most enthusiastic over any difficult or particularly "beautiful" case which they reported to him or allowed him to see.

So he fell innocently into Octave's little trap, and the girl was now fortified with all the information she required. The opportunity she craved had come, and, though she trembled a little, she improved it.

Melville had naturally asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that, according to my Uncle Fritz, you are not what you think, — incurable."

"The best physicians in the country have said I am!" cried the lad, mournfully.

"There is a better than the best, and he is 'in the land' now, if you will see him."

"Who sent you in here to distress me like this?"

"My love for you."

"Your love! A pretty way you take of showing it!"

"I think it is the best way, Cousin Melville."

"It is cruel to raise false hopes like that."

"Pooh! Are you any worse off for hearing about this great surgeon? If you are so indifferent to yourself that you will not endure a little suffering to be made well, you are certainly too small-minded to be very greatly hurt; and if you are willing, is n't it love for you that has prompted me to find out all about it, and tell you? I thought I 'd sound you first, yourself, because it all rests with you. Then, if you had any sense, I would get Uncle Fritz, who is as wise as the wisest where surgery is concerned, to tell you everything he knows. He does n't know that I am going to talk with you, nor anybody; and no one need know if you do not choose differently."

"Octave, if I were never so willing, Grandmother Capers would never allow it."

"No, Melville; I know that. But — why hide it? You know, you must know, what the others all think, that dear old Mrs. Capers is just slowly and gently dying. She cannot live very long to

wait upon you, even if she gets up from this strange sickness which nobody understands exactly, and I should think you would like to change places and do a few things for her, who has done so many for you."

Poor Octave had been sorely troubled by Mrs. Capers's illness. All the household had reassured her again and again that she was mistaken, but she could not help fancying that her little brother's encounter with "the Witch of Endor" had something to do with his victim's fading away. And, since she could do nothing for her personally, she longed beyond telling to help the grandson who was more to the doting old heart than its own life. After she ceased speaking the cousins lay each very quiet for a long time. Octave was frightened by her own temerity, now that the deed had really been done; and in Melville's breast hope and despair surged up and down tumultuously.

So occupied, indeed, were they with their own thoughts that they did not perceive the entrance of a frail little figure of a woman, which glided softly in its old familiar way to the foot of Melville's lounge.

"What is that, my darling, about your being cured?" said a pathetically feeble voice, so suddenly that both the hearers started violently.

Mrs. Capers had seated herself on the lounge, but so weakly and tremblingly that the others expected to see her fall. Octave half slipped from her low bed, forgetting her own injury in her eagerness to support the tottering old lady; but she was arrested as much by the words which followed as by the exquisite torture of her injured ankle.

"Melville, I have heard the whole talk. I — I am going to die — as this young girl says. I am not sorry, except for you; and now I am not sorry at all. I could not bear to see you suffer any more, or to endure — an operation, — even though it might cure you. I love — I love you too well. But, when I am gone, I want you to try it, if — if you have the courage. There will be money enough, plenty of money to pay anything this great doctor asks. Promise me, darling; that is, if — you don't mind, if you wish to, that you — will see this surgeon. I shall die happy then."

The sick woman's long speech, and her eagerness to utter it, exhausted her. Appalled by the unexpected effect of their own words, the children gazed at her in helpless silence. But suddenly, upon the wan features turned so anxiously toward Melville, there came a change which even his inexperienced eye was swift to interpret.

With a strength born of excitement, — or given by God, — he forced his useless body downward upon the lounge until he could clasp and hold his grandmother's head against his breast.

Then a rapture, born of her great love for him and of her gratitude for his unwonted tenderness, illumined the aged face: "My darling — my darling!" she cried faintly. And, as if overweighted by happiness, the white lids closed above the faded eyes which had looked for so little in this world.

For a long time the stillness remained unbroken. Then a groan burst from the lips of the lad who had held a great love lightly — till it was lost.

CHAPTER XI.

"YES, that is what she needs; it is the only thing." The doctor said this very firmly and gravely; but quiet as his words were they set the impetuous heart of Ruth Kinsolving in a fever of anxiety.

"I am sure thee is hiding something from me, Doctor Winslow; and I wish thee to tell me the worst. If my mother is — is going to follow Margaret Capers, I — I must know it."

"She is not going to follow her, if you do as I say. Take Mrs. Kinsolving away at once to the sea-shore, or to some restful place, where she can have a complete change of air, and as little disturbance of her habits, otherwise, as possible."

Aunt Ruth looked up searchingly; but seeing nothing in the familiar face of their old physician to warrant her dreadful fear, her thoughts turned at once to a lesser trouble. It was all very well for Doctor Winslow to say, "Go away to the sea-shore," but how was this apparently simple matter to be accomplished?

The death of Mrs. Capers left the invalid Melville entirely dependent upon his aunt's care. His grief had been profound and prostrating; for that sorrow is always keenest which has self-reproach as a factor; and though a fortnight had elapsed since the quiet funeral, its influence still hung, pall-like, over the house.

Octave was better; but she could not yet put her injured foot to the floor without great suffering; although the broken arm was mending fast, and gave the self-helpful girl little trouble. It was astonishing how much she could accomplish with that deft left hand of hers; and she laughingly declared she had been gifted with her power to use it as others use their right, expressly for this time of need.

Mr. Pickel had been obliged to leave them, or lose entirely the business opportunities which had brought him all the way from Germany, and which he was ambitious to improve "on his children's account." It was all for the children — his care, his life, his love; and Ruth Kinsolving could not live for so many days in the society of this unselfish man without catching something of his spirit.

From an unwelcome burden, she had also come to regard her sister Lydia's family as a sacred charge; and, as each girl of the group resolved herself into a distinct individuality, the aunt's interest increased. She grew almost morbidly anxious lest she should fail in her "duty" to one or other of the orphans.

How, then, was she to leave them with only a servant to look after them?

Perplexed and troubled, she returned after the doctor's visit to her mother's room, and one keen glance into the tired eyes of the sweet old lady settled the matter for her. Her mother was more to her than all the orphans in the world. Her mother was drooping sadly, overcome, the doctor thought, by a burden of care she should not have assumed, and shocked and broken by the death of her old friend, Margaret Capers.

It seemed that turmoil and confusion had come to The Snuggery only with the coming of the Pickels. Well, she would leave them the house, and they might tear it roof from rafter, for all she cared at that moment; she would do her duty by her mother, let come what would come!

Her energetic movement aroused Grandmother Kinsolving's curiosity.

"What is it, daughter?"

Ruth intended to be very prudent and announce her plan in the least startling manner, but she was far too impulsive and too much in earnest to do this successfully. She tried, beginning two or three sentences in a temporizing fashion, and ending with an outburst of tears:

"The doctor says that thee is ill, so ill that I must take thee to the sea-shore. Tell me, darling mother, that it is not so very, very bad!"

Amy Kinsolving smiled. To Ruth there was nothing so beautiful as her mother's smile, and that it still was left to cheer her went far toward calming her anxiety.

"The doctor is right, Ruth. I am a little worn and tired by this upsetting of our quiet life; but a few weeks away from it will give me strength to face the winter without being an added burden to thy weary shoulders. Thee needs the rest as much as I do. Thee takes things too much in earnest, and frets thyself over imaginary shortcomings. We will go away and leave the 'little

pickles' to look after themselves, under Rosetta Perkins's direction."

Since her mother took the proposition so quietly, and answered so cheerfully, Ruth's anxiety flew round to another side of the subject. "Rosetta Perkins! A pretty woman she is to have the care of such a houseful of young people!"

"She is an excellent cook."

"Mother Amy! What has that to do with it?"

"More than thee thinks. Thee worries over the children's minds and morals, and that is well enough in a way, but if their bodies are healthy and sound, they may be safely trusted to do pretty nearly right. They come of good stock."

Ruth was speechless with amused surprise. Such words seemed like heresy on the lips of the saintly Amy; but they had the effect of checking her own anxiety and of assuring her that her mother was not so dangerously ill as she had feared.

"I suppose we can trust Content to keep things straight, under Rosetta," said Ruth, so merrily

that her mother's heart lightened. If Ruth had been worrying about her, she had also been worrying about Ruth; and, when matters reach this stage between two people, it is time that somebody else stepped in and set them at ease. Good Doctor Winslow had done so by his pleasant prescription; and, already, in less than five minutes after he had given it, its beneficent effects were evident. The sea-shore trip had become a matter-of-course; what was the house to worry about, more than a house? And as for the children, how could they go far astray in that peaceful abode?

"Content shall have her share of the task; but Paula is the elder. Paula must be prime minister," said Grandmother Kinsolving.

"Paula, mother? Paula is no more fit to be set over the others than — than I am!"

"It will make a vast difference to the girl whether she is put in authority or whether she assumes it. Paula will do right; thee may depend upon it."

"Mother Amy, thee is either a very foolish or a very wise woman."

"Daughter Ruth, I have lived long. The years should teach me something."

"And thee is not afraid to put that maid of airs and graces to rule in thy stead?"

"Not one whit afraid."

"Humph! I wash my hands of the responsibility!" said Ruth, half-laughingly, half-seriously, and tossing those same shapely hands upward in a deprecating fashion.

"Do that really, my daughter; cease 'carrying coals to Newcastle,' and thee will find life a better thing. Thee is a good 'Martha,' but thee remembers about 'Mary?'"

"Thee is the 'Mary' of this household, sweet mother. Thee has always had 'the better part.' I will try to learn of thee." As she said this, the daughter stooped and kissed her mother's cheek; then she went swiftly out of the room, intent upon setting things in readiness for her contemplated absence.

Ruth Kinsolving found always her best antidote for anxiety in activity; and so promptly did she settle all the details of the household management during Paula's and Rosetta's reign, that she

was ready on the next morning to start with her mother for that vacation of rest they both needed.

The group of young folks who watched their carriage out of sight felt for a few moments a sense of desolation which even Paula's pride in authority, or Content's serenity, could not banish.

"Oh, dear! I feel — I feel so lumpy, and kind of sick inside," said little Fritz, dropping his head on Christina's shoulder; "I don't see what makes folks go away all the time."

"Let's all go into Melville's room and be miserable together," said Content, trying to smile, yet finding the tears interfering; "I think I heard Octave say that Melville had had a letter from your Uncle Fritz."

To the little Pickels, that was a name "to conjure by"; and with a quick change of sentiment, they rushed pell-mell into "the lion's den."

CHAPTER XII.

"I TELL you, you must do it!"

"I won't!"

There was considerable "substance" in each voice. Melville, however, had the advantage of years and his terrible "roar," which, even accustomed as he had become to it, Fritzy never heard without a little tremor.

The child stood at a safe distance from the invalid's lounge, and held in his hands a worn and scraggy old cat. "I say she is my very own, 'cause I found her. She ain't yours, nor she ain't grandma's. They sha'n't nobody touch a bit of her. She 's mine."

"In the interests of science, Fritzy," said Melville, changing his tone.

"Don't care nothin' about the int'rusts of science; my cat is my own."

"I'll buy her of you."

"Don't want to sell her."

"Fifty cents will get an awful lot of taffy."

"There ain't any shops on Deer Hill." The change in tone told that Fritz's obstinacy was weakening. He looked down speculatively at the disreputable-appearing animal in his arms. She was a cat of many battles, and many "droppings." By this last method do the soft-hearted country-folk pass on to their neighbors the nuisance which has become intolerable to themselves. There are tramp cats as well as human beings; and if the "Marm Puss," which was losing her breath under her captor's tight squeeze, could have told the tale of her life, it would have harrowed the soul of the boy so that even "taffy" would have been powerless to tempt him. "Marm Puss" had tumbled out of a bag at The Snuggery gate that very morning, brought thither by a boarding-house mistress from whom grimalkin had stolen various bits of food.

"It's a good place," said the boarding-mistress, furtively watching the cat scamper barn-wards after her liberation. "These folks are Quakers, and they keep cows." Then she had hurried away, lest her unneighborly action should be discovered, and thinking herself very kind

because she had not killed the animal outright instead of "dropping" it. She little dreamed for what a fate she had reserved it.

"It's an unhappy old thing. It would rather die than live."

"Pooh! Would you?"

"No; but then, I am a man."

"You ain't! You 're a boy, same 's I am, only bigger. If it was your cat, would you sell it?"

"Yes, for a quarter; and I 've offered you fifty cents. I 'll make it seventy-five if you will chloroform her for me, and help me with the whole business. But you could n't; you 'd have to blab."

"I would n't, neither. I never blabbed in my life. I never told nothin' when I said I would n't. Ask Fritzy Nunky, when he comes."

"'Fritzy Nunky' would like to have you do this for me; he 's scientific himself. He would have been a great surgeon; have n't you heard him say so?"

"What 's that to do with this old cat?"

"Come here and I 'll tell you."

"You won't grab her 'thout I say so? an' you won't hit me?"

"Not a grab, not a hit," replied Melville, impressively. He was ostentatiously taking out of a purse three shining quarter-dollars. Then he turned them over and over so that their alluring glitter fell squarely upon little Fritz's sight. He was not in the least a mercenary child. Quarter-dollars for their own sake might have been spread before him in piles, and he would not have coveted them. But quarter-dollars for "taffy's" sake — Ah! that was another matter.

"If you was a-going to buy it, where would you go?" he asked, slowly.

"To Mrs. Duncan's thread-and-needle store, in the village."

"Pooh! I know better," retorted the victim of temptation; "you go to candy shops for candy."

"True; this is n't a city like Munich, or New York, where you staid that week before you came here with your Uncle Fritz. Up here in the country they keep everything in one shop."

"Every what thing?" The questioner's tone was still doubtful.

"Why, just — everything. I can't make it any plainer. 'Abry-ham' buys his shoes there, and

his wife her dresses. Grandmother gets her milk-pans there, and there is a candy counter."

"How do you know? You ain't never been there."

"Content has; she told me, and I've heard it in dozens of ways. I know it, sure."

Fritzy considered Content a responsible person, if there was one anywhere. Her testimony seemed conclusive, but he had not yet exhausted the subject. "Do they keep fish-hooks?"

"Fish-hooks, and rods, and — everything."

"How would you go?"

"If I were you, and had seventy-five cents to spend?"

"Yep," answered the younger cousin, fixing his eyes anew on the quarter-dollars, and roughly estimating how many fish-hooks and how much "taffy" they represented.

"I'd harness my pony to the cart, and I'd drive down the mountain like split. But, first, I'd help my poor cousin to learn all about anatomy."

"What's a 'natomy?'"

"What's a boy but a living interrogation

point! Come! I'm not going to argue all day. If you want the seventy-five cents, and the taffy, and the fish-hooks, and any other thing you happen to see, why, now's your chance. If you don't, all right. I can hire Luke Tewksbury to help me. He'd do it for a quarter, and throw in a kitten to bind the bargain."

Fritz's own truthfulness made him accept this statement literally. The silver in his cousin's hand assumed larger proportions; and the sudden remembrance of how long it was since he had really tasted taffy overcame his last scruple.

"I'll do it!" he said, heroically, yielding the now drowsy object of barter to his cousin's grasp. A slight misgiving as he did so died when he saw how contentedly the creature curled herself down upon Melville's luxurious cushions.

"She looks as if she liked you, a'ready," said the little boy.

"Of course she does. She is a self-denying animal, who is glad to die for science's sake."

Fritz did wish that Melville would not use that unpleasant word "die" so frequently. Whenever he heard it he did n't like to look at "Marm

Puss." Seeing this, the elder boy hastened matters.

"Go to that closet there. Open the door, and, on the right-hand corner of the lowest shelf, you will see a big bottle with a glass stopper. A blue bottle. — Find it?"

"Yep."

"Bring it, then; and hurry up. First, go and lock both doors."

"What for?"

"See here, youngster, you quit that 'what for' business. I have n't time to answer any more questions, and now you have sold yourself to me you can't go back on your word. All you 've got to do is to obey. I 'll take all the responsibility. You lock those doors, so that the meddling girls can't come in. Girls always want to poke their noses into boys' business, you know."

It gratified Fritzy to think that he was "boys," having been accustomed to consider himself just "little Fritz." He went obediently to the two doors, and fastened each. Then the windows; for Melville was determined to make sure of no interruption.

When that was settled satisfactorily, he took off the pretty cover of a big down pillow, and drew it cautiously over the unsuspecting cat's head. Tired with many wanderings, she did not in the slightest resist; especially as Melville's touch was soft and caressing, deluding not only the four-footed victim but the little traitor who had sold her unto death.

"Now, Fritz, you go to that other closet beside the chimney. Take out some of the books that are on the floor, and fix the latch so it works all right. Can you shut it tight?"

"Tight as a drum!"

"Put the bottle in there, and get the cork all ready to take out, but don't you take it out yet."

"I've done that. What next?" Fritz was too genuine a boy not to have entered into the spirit of this dark transaction by that time. His blue eyes were big with importance; his cheeks glowed; he whistled softly to himself.

"Next is — the job itself. Now, you must understand clearly. If you don't, it'll be a fizzle. I'm half sorry I didn't get somebody bigger to help me."

The tone and the words put Fritz on his mettle. "I'm big enough to kill a old cat, I reckon! If I ain't, I should like to know!"

"Remember, it won't hurt her. So, if she struggles, don't you back out."

"I won't," said Fritz, stoutly.

"Then, take the animal and fire ahead. When you get her into the closet, pull the stopper out of the bottle, open the bag and pour it in, and shut the door."

It all appeared very simple to the elder boy; and even so in a less degree to his small assistant. But they had counted upon the non-resistance of the victim.

Now, it seemed as if she had heard their plotting, for all at once she sprung from the cushion-cover which served as her prison, and flew to the farthest corner of the big room. For an instant the two lads gazed after her in surprise that one who simulated submission so thoroughly should develop such a gift for self-preservation. Another instant, and Melville's "roar" arose upon the air.

"You horrid little imp! After all the money I

gave you, to let her go like that! I'd be ashamed to call myself a boy!"

"I did n't let her go, she let herself go. But I 'll catch her again, see if I don't."

"You can't! And I wanted to dissect her! Your Uncle Fritz says there is no reason why I should n't be a great doctor, even if his famous surgeon does n't cure me. And how am I going to learn if I can't trust anybody to help me! I say it 's too bad!" cried Melville.

The excitement of the chase, added to all this, acted upon the blood of little Fritz like flame upon gunpowder. His voice took on a tone which silenced the elder cousin's complaints, and hushed him to watchfulness.

"You shut up a minute, so 's not to scare her so, an' I 'll catch her again. I will, true as you live!"

Round and round the room, over chairs and tables darted poor "Marm Puss," and Fritz behind her. He was almost as lithe as she, and even more determined. Twice they bounded across Melville's lounge, but by then he had become himself so excited over the game that he

merely ducked his head aside, and said not a word.

The chase ended with the victory in Fritz's hands. The strength of the ancient animal was no match for his, and her spirit had long ago been broken. It had flamed up anew for a brief instant, but had died ignominiously, and she had not enough "fight" left in her to use her claws when she was finally captured and thrust, head foremost, into the bag.

Into the closet Fritz rushed; and banged the pillow-cover with his victim on the floor. Grimalkin's spirit might have been dead, but her voice was not. It was her voice which had been the cause of much of her unhappiness in life, and was destined to be her final undoing. She miauled so lustily that she angered her little captor, and made him unmindful of his cousin's loud remonstrance.

"Come out of the closet, Fritz! Come out of the closet!"

No notice was taken of the appeal.

"Oh, you little simpleton! You must come out of the closet! I didn't tell you to go in and

shut the door behind you! Don't open the bottle till you have come out."

The vigorous thumping of the bag and its contents upon the floor told that the tragic end had not yet been achieved, and the miauling continued so long that Melville did not observe when it at last grew less violent; though his entreaties to his little cousin were unceasing.

"O Fritzy, dear little Fritz! Come out of it quick! All the doors and windows are shut and I cannot help you! Fritz — Fritz!"

Melville paused to listen and to breathe; but the sounds had all ceased behind that fast shut door, and the sickening odor which stole through the crevices told him that his cries had come too late.

A moment later, and his own consciousness seemed to leave him, as the terrible significance of his own work came full upon him.

CHAPTER XIII.

IF Fritz had not heard the appeals which the frantic Melville made to him, they had reached other ears, and summoned the help which the crippled lad was so impotent to render.

Rosetta Perkins, "mistress of the interior," as Octave called her when Aunt Ruth had reported her mother's decision concerning the household heads, during the sea-shore sojourn, — Rosetta Perkins had come to Melville's quarter of the house for the express purpose of hearing his capricious desires concerning his supper.

Rosetta was conscientious in the discharge of her duties, and had already done more cooking than would have sufficed a family twice as large, in her fear lest these young charges of hers should not get enough to eat. Eat! How they did eat! All except Melville; and because he did not, the good Rosetta was worried and full of self-blame.

But, for the first time, his fitful appetite proved

a blessing, since it brought upon the scene, in their extremity of need, a person to rescue the two boys.

"To the land sakes! What on airth is Melville a-hollerin' so fer!"

Rosetta quickened her footsteps, but as the cries died for a moment, loitered for an instant to set straight a misplaced chair, and tidy the furniture which showed the careless fingers of youth.

The cries, that were almost shrieks in their intensity of terror, recommenced.

"Why, that ain't spunk! That's something worse 'an that! What can have happened to him!" Mrs. Perkins flew to the door, wondering to find it closed, and rebounding, as she threw her force against it, from its unyielding surface. She tried the latch, and found the bolt had been slipped. The cries ceased again.

"I'm a-comin', Melville. I'll run around to the other door."

Only to meet with fresh disappointment; and, in her wonder and distress, Mrs. Perkins began to shake the door vigorously. "Ain't there nobody

in there with ye? How did ye get locked in? Never mind; I 'll get it open somehow. I warrant it 's some o' them childern's pranks," she added, under her breath. Then she tried the latch anew.

She began to be seriously alarmed. She ran to the hall window, and saw Luke mowing the lawn. After repeated efforts, she made her voice audible above that of the noisy little machine so close to his ear. He looked up and saw her frantic motions even before he heard her summons.

Luke had a soul above lawn-mowers, and always on the alert for excitement. He was at the hall window in a trice.

"Come into the house as quick as ye kin, Luke! Melville's doors is both locked fast, an' he 's been a hollerin like all possessed. Now he 's stopped; but say — don't you smell nothin' kinder queer?"

Luke sniffed, and made up such a horrid face in doing so that Christina, who had appeared behind Mrs. Perkins, laughed. "What is the matter, Rosetta? Octave made me come and

see. She says somebody has been holloaing this ever so long, but I thought it was somebody out in the field."

"Then ain't you ner Octavy in Melville's room?"

"Why, no! Abraham carried Octave out to the hammock after dinner, and I have been with her."

"Where's Content? An' Pauly?"

"Gone to the post-office in the pony-cart."

"Little Fritzy?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered poor Christina, her gentle face growing very pale and terrified.

"Then there's sunthin' turrible to pay! Smash that door open, Luke!"

"Smash the door? I dassent!"

"Smash it, I tell ye! I'll bear the blame, if there is any!"

Luke tried an ineffective blow, and Mrs. Perkins grew more excited. "Luke Tewksbury! Smash it! That there smell's chloroform! I know it; I kin almost taste it! I hain't handled the stuff as many times as I have, a-rubbin'

Melville's poor body, 'ithout larnin' the smell. Sunthin's happened to the bottle on it, an' one, mebbe both, o' them boys is shet up behind thet door! *Now* — will ye smash it?"

A terrific blow of his mighty fist was Luke's effective answer, and the panel gave way.

With a swiftness and coolness one would scarcely have looked for in Rosetta Perkins's case, since Ruth had called her a "good woman without any head-piece," the housekeeper thrust her hand through the break in the wood, and unfastened the bolt. Every movement she made told in effect, as she almost flew across the apartment, dashed open the windows, drew the bolt and opened the bedroom door, and caught up a pitcher of water to throw it upon Melville's face.

The air was nauseous with fumes of the drug, but it was less that which had overcome the invalid than horror at his own deed, and its awful result. With the thought that little Fritz had been the victim of his would-be scientific experiment, his weak nerves had given way; but his last conscious thought had been: "Cripple or not, I must save him!"

It seemed that the power of this determination was already bringing him out of his swoon, for the water had scarcely reached his face before he opened his eyes. Instantly they filled with terror. "The closet! The closet! Open the closet!"

"What — which closet?" asked Rosetta, trembling.

"Open it — open it, quick! Maybe he isn't dead!"

Mrs. Perkins's sight swam. The reality seemed worse than she had feared. But Christina had heard and understood the appeal, and flew to the inner door.

"The other — the other!" directed Melville's agonized voice.

Luke was beforehand with her, and even his strong physique was for an instant overcome by the pungency of the odor which filled his nostrils. He staggered for a step or two, and then, as the little girl was darting forward, he put her gently aside and stooped down to lift the small figure, which the light now made visible, from its resting-place upon the closet floor.

There was one brief word of command: "The doctor"; and Luke had flown to obey it. Then, forgetting utterly for that terrible moment the suffering boy upon the lounge, the housekeeper bore her inert burden straight out of doors, and to the old well in the garden.

She could not have done better; but she was still working and chafing the rounded little limbs, which had before seemed all too active, and praying over her task with the devout fervor of her warm, believing heart, when Luke reappeared with the doctor.

"Oh! how glad I am! I did n't dream you would get here so quick!"

"I was just driving down the road. And well that I was," added the physician gravely.

It was three hours after that when he went away, even then promising to return again before midnight; but, when he did leave The Snuggery for a brief time, it was with the hopeful assurance that "if nothing unforeseen occurred," the little fellow would be none the worse for his dangerous experience.

"Such a world of joy or pain hangs on that

little 'if!'" exclaimed poor Paula, between her sobs.

For once, Content's ready word of comfort failed her; and she could not utter that "it is all for the best," which seemed such a truism in the presence of this anxiety. She could see no "best" which might be extracted from that afternoon's misfortune; and she could only fold her sympathetic arms about the cousin whom, till now, she had thought so cold of heart, and let her tears mingle with Paula's.

It was the wisest and kindest thing she could have done. Paula had nourished a mistaken notion that her "perfect Cousin Content" considered herself infinitely superior to the worldly and frivolous "Miss Pickel," whose main interests in life appeared to be dress and the supervision of her neighbors' manners.

The truth was simply that each girl was to the other a new and uncomprehended type. Octave had early nicknamed the one "Beauty," the other "Duty"; and, unlike as they were, it took just such a sorrow to break away the outer form of habit and training, and show the warm, friendly hearts beneath.

The lonely, only child, Content, had become very fond of little Fritz, and the genuineness of her feeling touched the sister who watched so anxiously beside him. A half-hour of this common grief did more to make them know and love each other than had all their previous weeks of daily intercourse.

But the "best" was still in it all, even if hidden from sight just then; and it was destined to work a blessed change not only in that household but in many another, to which its after effects should reach.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR some days after this affair, the "pickles" remained quietly in their "jar," as Octave laughingly called the great house, wherein they were all gathered at nightfall, no matter how widely they scattered themselves by day.

Content had a fine camera, and considerable skill in using it; so that on all possible occasions she was away over the mountains, taking "views" of this or that place, which her father had described to her as being dear to him in his boyhood. Bulky letters were regularly sent to Osaka, and in each there was some new glimpse of familiar scenes, which the missionary welcomed eagerly.

But this delightful occupation, as well as Paula's "art" work, Christina's lessons, and Melville's "experiments," were discontinued while the child who was the "life of the house" remained drooping, and showing any effects of his accident.

Octave had nearly recovered the use of her nimble feet, and had, long before the doctor advised it, begun to use the broken arm. The one thing which was impossible to the active girl was quiet; and one morning she announced to the physician that her arm was "mended better than the original," and that she was going to "help Melville do up some beetles."

Christina was at that very hour assisting Rosetta to "do up" gooseberries; and the difference in the choice of occupations showed perfectly the difference in the sisters.

Doctor Winslow smiled. He had congratulated himself upon having kept his uneasy charge still as long as he had; and, indeed, he would have found this far more difficult had not the condition of Fritz engrossed all their thoughts. However, that very morning the little fellow had come down to breakfast with the rest, and insisted upon it that "Paula should stop making believe he was sick when he was n't no such thing, so there; and he was going out to have a tussle with Don."

"'T won't hurt him a mite," remarked Rosetta,

when Christina had reported Fritzy's daring proposal to her. "Thar ain't ben nothin' the matter with him, anyhow, 'cept his losin' his senses. I've ben a thinkin' this couple o' days 'at ye'd all make the child sick with your cossetin' him an' feedin' him trash. Let him try the donkey; he won't get fur, ner overheat hisself a-ridin'."

So Fritz marched boldly up to the aged burro, and essayed to saddle him. All offers of aid in this matter had been haughtily rejected, and nothing could so easily have convinced them all that their darling was quite himself again as his amusing little swagger.

"Pooh! Must think I'm nobody! Here I have been a-drivin' that mare of mine away down the mountain, and back; an' you folks think I can't saddle a silly old donk! Pooh! I'll show you!"

The show that he did afford them was certainly a funny one, though not of the kind the little lad himself intended.

From his lonely room, Melville heard the fun, and distinctly recognized the voice of his small

cousin. The sound of it in happy activity again was sweet to his ears, for he had never ceased to regret his unintentional injury of the child. Octave had noticed this change more than any of the others, and wondered at first what "had come over Melville to be so like other folks"; and, being of a nature opposed to secrecy, had promptly asked him.

"Well, I tell you, Octave; I had a big scare. What if — no matter, he's all right again, you say; and one thing I mean to do: I mean to think more about other people and less about myself."

He had said this shamefacedly, as if he did not feel sure of himself, but did feel sure of her ridicule.

It came swiftly on the heels of his confession.

"That's all nonsense, Melville Capers. 'You are no saint, and you need n't pose for one.' You have worried everybody about you ever since you were born, and you will go on worrying somebody to the end. I don't take any stock in your talk. You're a little scared over what you've done; but soon as Fritzy is all right again you'll be just as disagreeable as ever."

"You 're a hateful girl!"

"There! I told you so! Don't, for goodness' sake, — yes, for goodness ' real sake, — don't ever tell anybody that you mean to be 'unselfish.' He or she won't believe you, to begin with; and if they suspect your intention they will watch you to see the miracle. Talk is the most inexpensive thing in the world. I used to tell how good I would be, and then Paula would fix her big eyes on me and stare, every time I did any mean little thing. Even Fritzy Nunky would put me all out by taking me at my word. He 'd look so surprised when I was n't a saint right away quick. Then I 'd get mad, and the last state of that girl was worse than the first. If Content heard me quote that, she 'd look at me in pious horror; and yet I mean it. No, Melville; take the advice of one who has had experience, don't lay that sweet unction of 'going to be' to your soul. 'Going to be' never comes. It 's like the poetry talk about 'there is no to-morrow.' And there is n't."

"Ancient maiden, what would you recommend?" asked the invalid, his anger disarmed

by finding Octave so promptly ready to embark in the same boat of shortcomings with himself.

"The only thing I have ever found amounted to anything was just keeping busy, as busy as busy! If I keep doing something, I don't have so much time to be bad."

"Yes, but"—objected the repulsed aspirant after unselfishness.

"Here, I 'll roll your lounge over there by the window. Then you can see the fun. That 'll be better for you than moping over your own 'goings to be!'"

Octave set to work; but her arm was not so strong as she thought it, and her lame ankle interferred with her freedom of movement. Suddenly she stumbled and sat down on the floor, "with a pretty conside'ble of a bang," as Rosetta would have said.

"I'm sorry, Octave. Don't try again. I don't mind." The tone was so genuine that the girl opened her eyes which she had closed in a comical grimace of pain.

"Why—why, Melville!"

"Why what?" asked he, testily.

"I believe you mean it!"

"I — but you said something about talk being cheap."

"Inexpensive, dear. I'm trying to form myself after an approved model, of polysyllables. Paula has really been so faithful to little Fritz that I thought she would be pleased with me if I was correct. She was n't, though. When I put on my prettiest airs she looked at me and said, — as only Paula can say things, — 'Octave, don't be foolish!' It was a disappointment: but with your example before me I 'll persevere."

The girl had rattled on in her nonsense talk till the pain in her ankle abated so that she could pull herself up, and make a fresh effort. Another burst of gayety sounded through the window, and, with a final push, she sent Melville's heavy lounge rolling across the room, to bring up against the wall with a crash.

"I meant to do it, 'er bust,' as Abry-ham says. What do you think he calls me now?"

"'Octavy — why, Octavy!'" promptly replied her cousin.

"Wrong! I am now 'Hoppity-pat.' That's

what I call making sport of one's infirmities." The girl perched herself upon the window-ledge and watched the scene out of doors with keen enjoyment, that was enhanced by the thought that her bed-ridden cousin could also witness it.

Early in their acquaintance Fritz had tried cajolery with the ancient burro who lived at his ease on the rich pastures of The Snuggery farm, and had made many attempts to ride him; but the overtures had not been met in a friendly spirit. Then Fritz's temper had aroused.

"I will ride that homely old thing with a head as big as its body, so there! He looks like grandmother's old hair-trunk, up in the attic, with sticks for legs."

But appearances are often deceitful. Don's look of dejection did not cover a meek or subdued spirit. He opposed his "won't" to Fritzy's "will" with a persistence that was discouraging. On the boy's part, however, fresh attempts were as persistently made; and on this occasion seemed to promise success.

Fritz had achieved a mount. He sat with fat little legs extending at right angles from the

burro's sides, trembling, but flushed with victory.

Suddenly, Don raised his hind quarters.

Fritz would have gone over the animal's head but for the firm hold he had of his neck.

Don tried sitting down. Fritz stood up, but still astride of the donkey, and still holding on with all his might.

Then the quadruped turned his head and — so Fritz ever afterward believed — actually winked at his determined rider; immediately rising on all fours and setting off on a trot such as his venerable limbs had not attempted for years.

Around and around the grass plot he raced, till all at once he appeared to collapse; then he sunk down on the ground, rolled over on his side, and uttered a pathetic bray, as if his last hour had come.

"I did! I did! I did ride the old thing!" exulted the excited conqueror, and sped away to boast of his achievement to Abraham.

After this amusing conclusion of the set-to between her little brother and his victim, Octave's laughter was checked by an unmistakable sigh from the boy beside her. She looked quickly around.

"Why, Melville! What is it?"

"To think that I can never do anything that any one else can!"

"Because you are to do that which nobody else can do."

Melville looked up eagerly; but almost instantly his eye fell again, and, with the gloom of hopelessness, upon the group without.

"Yes, it is so. I know it. I have thought a way out," said Octave, answering his depressed look. "I came in here to make you promise that you would try it."

"I shall never try any more experiments after that experience."

"Not with babies, of course. With a man of science you would."

"How am I to meet a man of science, here on Deer Hill Mountain, and I a — cripple?" demanded the other, bitterly.

"Two ways are open: one, the poorest, by correspondence; the other I can help you to if you will trust me."

"You?" said Melville; and, in his sincere liking for Octave, he tried not say it contemptuously.

"Yes — I, young lord of creation; you think I don't know anything, don't you? Well, I don't, much, and it does n't matter, as long as I know enough to answer your purpose, and besides have the tremendous honor to be your — cousin! However, I can yet do things to further your ideas. If I bring you this man of science will you talk with him, or will you be cantankerous? Mind you, I don't do it just for you — but for the good of the world at large. I 'm a philanthropist, in general. I always felt that I was 'cut out' for something unusual; but I did n't dream it was to be scientific till I became your assistant. Say, will you?"

"You don't know any man of science; and — he would laugh at my 'cheek.'"

"All right. I 've always sighed for adventure, and now I shall have it. I feel like a conspirator — and it 's a perfectly exquisite sensation. Hurrah!"

"Octave Pickel! Are you crazy?"

"No. To prove it I will make you promise me something. I — I had a letter from Fritzy Nunky to-day."

The lad's face changed color. Then he asked:

"Well, what did he say?"

"He is in constant correspondence with the doctor; and that gentleman hopes to see you within a month."

Octave's voice, saying this, was very distinct and firm. It was what she had really come into the room to say, but after it was spoken she trembled.

Melville lay with his dark eyes fixed on hers as if he could scarcely credit his own ears. He was terrified, and yet glad; he depended upon her to stand by him, and yet he almost hated her for what she had done. All this Octave read with that keen intuition of hers, and if her face flushed a little her steadfast gaze did not cease to encourage him. "O Octave, have you really done it?"

"Really, Melville. The great doctor, the great healer, is surely coming."

"I — I cannot bear it!" Melville hid his face in his hands and a shudder passed over his thin frame.

A feeling of contempt for his weakness rose in

the girl's breast, but was quickly stifled. She forced herself to think of all he had endured, and that he had never known the happiness of activity. She, herself, could bear anything, any amount of torture, to be restored to health, were she in his stead; but Melville had suffered so much! It was a sign that her own womanly nature was developing in the right direction that she did remember all this, and that her next words should have been as wise.

"You can bear it bravely. I know you are no coward. Besides, it will not be suffering to you, but success. Think, Melville; you said the other day that you wished for nothing so much as fame. Well, then, if you are true to yourself in this, all the world will talk of you with wonder and gratitude. Listen — this is my plan." The girl pitched her voice too low for any possible overhearing; but what she said produced a marvellous effect upon her cousin.

"Oh, if it could be true! But it is too grand, too wonderful!"

"You won't be ashamed of poor 'Hoppity-pat,' then, will you?" asked Octave, a bit wistfully.

"It is nonsense. It will prove to be good for nothing."

"Come, you doubter. It's about as hard to pull you up the hill of faith as — I don't know what! Did n't our last experiment work 'as slick as grease?' *à la* Abry-ham. Do you suppose I 'd have handled all those frogs and hop-toads, and nasty, slimy other things, if after the first time I had n't had supreme faith in the — unnamable?"

Melville began to catch her enthusiasm. "Octave, if — if — it should be true, would n't it be glorious?"

"Would n't it? The best of it is that I feel it is. 'It 's borne in on me,' as Rosetta said when she forgot to put any sugar in the jam, and it would n't jam. Say, Melville, let 's just hurrah!"

"I can't hurrah, yet. But, Octave, you 're smart! It does n't seem as if you could be a girl, you think of things so."

"So grandma said, when I rode the kicking horse, bareback, and forgot to mend my stockings. Which was n't 'thinking of things so,' it seems to me. But, remember, if I am so bright, I shall expect my reward —"

"'To the half of my kingdom!'" interrupted Melville.

"Humph! Worse than that: you are not to tell a single soul, till the whole thing is settled. I'd like to be of some importance, for once in my life."

"All right. I'll not breathe a single syllable."

"Even if I do something you cannot understand?"

"Even so."

"Good enough! Isn't it delightful to be—conspirators?"

"I don't kn–ow," said the lad, doubtfully.

"Pshaw! I just believe you'd like to let the cat out of the bag now!"

"What difference would it make, any way? If I say I'll do it, I will. I won't back out."

"It makes all the difference in the world to me. For once I'm in a Mystery! Right in the very heart of it, spelled with a capital M! Generally I'm 'only Octave'; now I'm somebody. I have sighed all my life long for a romance or something out of the common; now I've attained it. Don't balk me of my sweet revenge. Think

of Paula Pickel's face when she hears that 'only Octave,' was the very identical damsel that went — but no matter! Remember that without me there is no 'man of science.'"

Melville did remember; and "wild goosey" as the whole affair did appear, even to him, he was so thoroughly in earnest, now, about it, and so uplifted by Octave's adventurous spirit, that he readily maintained the silence she required.

When, that night, at locking-up-time, Octave had not appeared, and Paula went to the room the sisters shared in common, hoping to find the wild-cap safe in bed, although the sheets had been turned down and then shaken, as if the well-grown lassie could by any possibility be hiding within them, there was great consternation in the household.

"She is always up to pranks, but she does not generally treat us unkindly," said the aggrieved elder girl, feeling somehow that the house was not a "Snuggery" without the sharpest of the "pickles."

"Oh, here is a note!" cried little Christina; who sometimes read a love-story surrepti-

tiously, and was akin to Octave in her desire for a "romance." "I've heard Octave say lots of times that some time she'd run away, and now I do believe she's done it! Read it, quick! I found it on her pincushion. That's the very place run-awayers always put notes."

"Pray, small one, how do you know that?" demanded Content, demurely. "I believe you've been reading Luke's 'Story Paper' again!"

"Well, read it any way," urged the little girl, in her excitement paying less heed than usual to Content's gentle reprimand.

This was the note, —

FRIENDS AND RELATIVES, ESPECIALLY PAULA:

I've gone, but not for good. I mean I have gone for good, as you will all know at some future to come. I haven't gone yet, but I'm going. I shall come to no harm, and you need not worry about me. When I return HE will be with me. That is, I hope HE will. HE will if my persuasions can prevail. I have money enough. Having none of my own, — as you all well know, I spent it for confections, — I have been supplied with funds by the OTHER CONSPIRATOR in the case. I do not know when I shall return, but I shall return; for I am the "bad penny" of the family. Don't sit up nights, and don't worry about me. I am all right, and I shall "continner on." Don't be silly enough to write to Aunt Ruth, for even she would have no terrors

for me, since I go to seek HIM. So don't worry about me. Bother! that's the third time I have written that perfectly unnecessary sentence, since she who writes is

"ONLY OCTAVE."

P. S. I am in a perfect heaven of delight. I was never a conspirator before, and I was never in a MYSTERY till now. I hope I can hatch up one every few days hereafter, it 's so enchanting. Just think! I, Octave Pickel, am a heroine!

Good-bye — farewell — addio!

When the note was carried to Melville, and his opinion asked, he burst into the merriest laugh that the astonished household had ever heard from him.

"I believe that you know all about it! You two have been together a great deal of late. If you do, you must tell us. Where is Octave?" cried poor Paula, all in a tremble of fright and eagerness.

But all the answer Melville gave, though he did it with the same unwonted mirthfulness was, "I don't know."

CHAPTER XV.

THE ways of cabmen are similar, the civilized world over; and it did not confuse Octave as it would a less accustomed traveller to have a number of these enterprising Jehus rush for her little hand-bag, as she emerged from the great station, and stood for a moment looking about her.

She had been half over Europe in company with her Uncle Fritz, who never liked to journey anywhere alone, and who found the sturdy Octave his least troublesome "pickle" whenever he was minded to refresh himself with the presence of any of them. Besides, the girl had the great gift of observation. If she had once seen a thing she never forgot it; all its little details had impressed themselves upon her memory with the distinctness of a photograph.

She had visited the great building where she had left the train but once before, and that once when, in company with her guardian, she had passed through it on her journey to Deer Hill.

Yet so keenly had she observed her surroundings, that she knew directly which way to turn for a certain kind-faced policeman, whom she had seen befriend a little girl while she was waiting for their outward-bound train.

Now, to look for a particular policeman in a great city like New York would have seemed to an older person very much like looking for the proverbial "needle in the hay-mow"; but to the adventurous and romantic Octave it appeared the simplest thing in the world. So, with a feeling of perfect security, she lightly moved away from the detaining cabbies, rigidly holding to the little satchel which contained a hair-brush and comb, and Melville's well-filled pocket-book.

Ah! there he was, in almost the same place on the block where she had last beheld him. And, with the confidence of an old acquaintance, Octave walked straight to the officer and bade him a pleasant "Good evening."

"Good evening," returned the gentleman in blue uniform, looking a little surprised at the unusual salutation. He was accustomed to be addressed as: "Say, look here! Where is, or what is, so and so?"

"I want to go to Prof. Edric von Holsneck's. Which is the best way, and will you get me a carriage?"

"Eh? What? I did n't quite 'catch on,'" was the reply.

Octave frowned. It was getting late, and she was anxious to get to her destination before it grew too dark for her to observe what Uncle Fritz called "her bearings." She had a wild idea of taking a night-train back to the mountain; but if she should find that unadvisable she would have to look up a lodging place.

"I want to go to the house of Prof. von Holsneck," said the girl, repeating her first statement with the distinctness known at The Snuggery as "Octave's spunk." "You certainly must know the residence of a man so famous."

"Well, I don't then. I know who he is and what he is; but where he lives I never took the trouble to find out. Why do you want to go there? He is a big feller, too busy to be bothered."

Octave tossed her head with a movement of scorn, which she considered quite womanly. "I

wish to see him on business. If — you don't know anything about him, how am I going to find my way?"

"Easy enough. Look in the Directory."

"Where will I find the 'Directory?'" asked the girl, tapping her foot impatiently.

"In the drug store on the corner."

Octave's eyes followed the glance of the policeman, and, thanking him, she made her way to the place and pursued her inquiries. Very speedily she had possessed herself of all the needed information, and set out to visit the great scientist. An older and a wiser person would have hesitated long before intruding upon one so fully occupied as Prof. von Holsneck; but the girl had but one idea in her mind, and believed that the man she sought was the best one in the world to help her to her object. Why, then, should she not go to him? To her it appeared the most natural way, when one was in need, to apply at head-quarters for the assistance required; and she knew very well that in neither Europe nor America was there any one who could approach the professor in his special branch of knowledge.

But, simple as the affair appeared to her, it did not apparently strike others in just the same light. The trim and prim lackey who opened the door of the great mansion to the plainly dressed girl stared at her in a most disconcerting way.

The professor was at home; but the professor was engaged in dining. The professor was not to be interrupted on any pretext whatever, when he was at table. Would she leave her card? This last inquiry with a supercilious sneer which, if anything had been needed to put Octave "on her mettle" would certainly have accomplished it.

"My card will be of no use, in this case. My business is personal; and I will come in and await the professor's leisure." She coolly moved forward into the vestibule, and, much as he would have liked to do so, the servant did not dare refuse her entrance. Nor was he wholly to be blamed for this reluctance. He knew, if she did not, that his master's hours of recreation were few, and of labor many; and that each had a distinct and weighty money value. The lackey's

business was to serve and save his employer, and in his eyes there seemed nothing which a chit of a girl, arriving in a cheap railway hack, could possibly want with the great man except to beg for something or other.

"Shall I wait here?" asked Octave, as the man allowed her to stand just within the entrance and made no effort to give her a seat.

"If you will tell me your business, I will see if you can have an audience; that is, when the professor has finished dining," replied the servant, loftily.

"It would be impossible for you to understand my business," replied the visitor with a hauteur fully equalling Jeems's own. And, as he stared at her afresh nor made any motion toward serving her, she walked into the first room she saw open, and quietly sat down to await developments.

"Well, I like this!" exclaimed the quick-tempered girl; "I wonder what Fritzy Nunky would say!"

Then she began to look about her, and soon forgot the awkwardness of her situation, the late-

ONE PAINTING ESPECIALLY CAPTIVATED HER ATTENTION. Page 175.

ness of the hour, and all the other disagreeable things which she should have remembered. The walls of the reception room were lined with pictures, and there was nothing which had so intense a fascination for Octave as a beautiful picture. She knew at a glance that these were such; though she could not have told why, save that they reminded her of those she had delighted in among the great galleries abroad, where she had so often gone with her Uncle Fritz.

One painting especially captivated her attention. It was an "Interior" of a German peasant home. In her childhood Octave had seen dozens just such homes, and in one of them she had passed some of the merriest days she could remember.

"Oh! I do believe that was painted for a portrait of dear old Hans Schwartz! And that is Gretchen with the baby — it really, really is! Oh, who could have done that, and how did it come here? Good evening, Hans; hast thou the white cow already milked? And may I have some of the foaming liquid for supper? Gretchen's brown bread would taste so good this

very minute. Give it, Gretchen, and I 'll nurse the baby for you." She had thought herself entirely alone when she entered the apartment, and she had forgotten everything else but delight at finding here a real — she was certain it was a real — portrait of some of her oldest friends. So thinking, she had not feared to talk aloud to them; and she was recalled to herself by the sharp surprise of hearing a voice close to her elbow.

"You seem to be impressed with that picture."

Octave wheeled around, too unconscious of herself to be abashed.

"Oh, but I have been in that very kitchen — I surely have, and drank my milk out of one of those very earthen bowls! I don't know who painted it, or how in the world it came here and I came to see it, but that is Hans Schwartz's cottage at Erding, where we children have passed three summers and had such fun." Octave paused in her eagerness, recalled to the time and place by the striking of a clock somewhere near.

The clear radiance of shaded electric lights suffused the apartment, which the girl now

observed was simply but elegantly arranged. For the first time a feeling of timidity stole over her, and a sense that she had intruded arose to trouble her. It might be that she had made a mistake; if so, the only thing left for her to do was to get away as quickly as she could. She looked into the face of the old man who had spoken to her, and noticed with satisfaction that he was as simply attired and as every-day-like in his appearance as herself.

"Can you tell me, sir, if it would be possible for me to have a few minutes' conversation with the gentleman who owns this house, — the great professor of chemistry, and — lots of other things?"

The old man smiled. "On what subject, my child?" He did not disconcert her as the liveried servant had done, and, if he was surprised to see her occupying the great man's gallery, and enjoying his pictures without leave or license, he was too kindly to say so.

"This dear old fellow is somebody's grandfather," thought Octave, reminded by his gentleness of Grandmother Amy; "I wonder if he is a

sort of upper servant; he looks as if he felt at home." Aloud she said: —

"I had rather not try to explain it to any one except the professor, or to some one he will recommend, if he is too busy to see me. It is about a discovery that a boy made. I don't understand it myself, but the boy wrote it all down on paper, and I have seen it act. I do hope he will see me, for I believe he would be interested, if he heard the whole story."

At that moment, Octave's suspicion that her companion was "somebody's grandfather" was confirmed. A merry little child ran into the room, and with a scream of delight that she had escaped her nurse's hands, bounded upon the old man's knee. "O grandpa! don't let her take me to bed, will you? I have n't played you were a bear for three days!"

"Three days, is it, sweetheart? That is long indeed, for little people to remember. Maybe I will play bear, soon; just now I am busy. Go and tell the good *bonne* that I wish you to stay up one half-hour longer; then you may come and sit upon my lap, and hear me talk with this young girl."

The child ran swiftly away, singing something in French; and thereby puzzling poor Octave's brain still more. A baby of three, possibly four, years old, who talked in excellent English and sang carols in French, was astonishing enough; but not so greatly such as to be met at the entrance by pomposity in livery and find the interior, if far richer, as unpretentious as the living room at The Snuggery.

Her puzzle was destined to increase. "Now, my dear, if you will show me the papers, and tell me what you wish, I shall be happy to serve you," said the old man, stroking his white beard and looking into her astonished eyes with the most encouraging of smiles.

"You — you? Are you Prof. Edric von Holsneck?" faltered Octave.

"Yes. It was he you came to see?"

"Yes, si–ir; but — but I — perhaps I had better go away. I did n't think so at first, but now it seems like presumption for me to talk to — to you." Try as she would, the girl could not reconcile the real professor with her preconceived notion of him. She had fancied a tall, stern, spectacled

person, in a laboratory, and with learning fairly oozing from his gaunt person. But this man, he might have been — anybody!

"There is no presumption in any honest person's talking to any other. Evidently you thought you had something worth saying or you would not have taken the trouble to come and try to say it. I shall be glad to hear or read the matter you have in hand." His manner, rather than his words, said also that he would be glad to do so at once, for wasted moments were a thing unknown in his day's calendar.

Octave became herself again on the instant. All her timidity vanished, and with the simple directness of manner which some found so charming because it was so wholly natural and unconscious of self, she told him Melville's story. The little grandchild came in, and, evidently accustomed to be quiet when her grandfather so desired, nestled herself in his arms and lay there still, with her eyes fixed upon Octave's face, and apparently listening closely to every word she uttered.

"The papers," said Prof. von Holsneck, when

she had related with lucid brevity all that had led up to Melville's discovery. His eyes had gained in brightness and his whole manner had lost the look of age and fatigue it had worn when Octave first beheld him. Knowledge was to this man what a draught of wine is to some others.

Swiftly Octave opened the closely guarded pocket-book, and gave the professor some simple lines of writing, with odd looking formulæ. To her, they were less intelligible than Greek; but to the gentleman they were a familiar language. Their meaning, also, appeared to have startled and delighted him; for he suddenly laid down the sheets of paper and looked at Octave searchingly. "Do you tell me that this was prepared by a boy of fourteen years? An invalid, and alone?"

"I do. He has had good instruction until within the last six months, when the professor who used to live on Deer Hill Mountain removed to the South. My cousin Melville cares for nothing so much as study, and he has had no chance to do anything else. I don't know much about boys, but it seems to me he is awfully clever, is he not?"

"He is more. He is a genius."

"And is the 'stuff,' good for anything?"

"Time will prove, and some exhaustive experiments. It interests me. I will look into it. If you will give me your address, I will write to him." Octave drew out her card, but, as she was about to hand it to her host, he said, "How did you come here? With friends?"

"I came alone, sir."

"Alone! Where shall you spend the night?"

"I — hoped to get through in time to go home, but I fear it is too late. Will you be good enough to tell me some hotel that is nearer the station than the *Metropole?* I want to get back as early in the morning as I can."

"Do you know the *Hotel Metropole?*"

"Yes, sir; we stopped there for a week when we came to America with Uncle Fritz. But it is a long way down, I think."

The great man looked at the girl who was but a child, but who seemed so little dismayed at hunting up a lodging place in a great city alone, and after dark. There was nothing bold in her manner, if there was perfect fearlessness — the

fearlessness of innocent ignorance. Then his eyes fell down upon the little grandchild in his arms. "My dear young lady, you are too young to have done this thing alone, and I cannot let you go away to-night. You must remain with us."

"Oh! sir, I did not dream of making myself such a trouble to you. I came only to find out for poor Melville if there was any thing in his idea, and I knew nobody could tell me as well as you. I could n't bear to have him bothered by people who did not know exactly; it will be such a glorious thing for him if he is right, and he could n't bear suspense."

The girl's flattering candor was pleasant to the learned man, for there is no one so wise but that he likes appreciation; besides, the frank face pleased him in other ways, and he was minded to hear the history of the cottage she had recognized by its portrait on his walls.

He touched a button, and the servant who had treated Octave with so much contempt appeared. "Send away this young lady's cab. She will pass the night here."

Octave held out her purse, but the professor waived it aside. "You are my guest. If I mistake not, the most notable I have entertained for many a day." The girl understood that he referred to Melville's possible discovery, for the same eager light had come into the bright eyes of the scientist, and she felt no undue elation at his words. She, the messenger, was nothing to him but a messenger; and, with a funny little grimace at herself, she reflected that even in this most important transaction of her young life she was still "only Octave."

"Why are you smiling, girl?" asked the grandchild, slipping her hand confidingly into the young visitor's.

"At foolish thoughts, my dear."

The professor roused himself. "Have you had your dinner, Miss —"

"Octave Pickel. No, sir; but that is of no consequence."

"It should be of the highest consequence to a growing girl. Run, little one, and ask grandmother to have supper prepared for our guest. And Pickel, you said? The name commends

itself to me. I am indebted to those of that name for many great kindnesses. It may not be the same family; yet you recognized the Erding cottage. Did you ever live at Munich?"

"It is my home," responded Octave, eagerly.

"The great publishing house of 'Pickel & Pickel' — do you know that, too?"

"Do I not? Since I am part of the '& Pickel.' The head of the house is Fritz; and Franz, his brother, was my father."

The professor held out his hands in cordial greeting. "Then, indeed, you are in the house of friends. Now, while the supper is made ready, tell me about the cottage the picture of which my son painted."

CHAPTER XVI.

It was a most unexpected journey that the over-busy scientist took, on the following morning, with the young girl whose audacious appeal to him had resulted with so much success to her. That is, it would have been considered audacious by the hosts of anxious men who were always coming and going, eager to consult the professor on matters of grave importance; and obliged, many and many a time, to defer that consultation till "a more convenient occasion." She had not only made her own "occasion," but had not even dreamed that any formality had been necessary.

As they neared the little station at the foot of Deer Hill Mountain, Octave's overflowing spirits found voice.

"Oh, I had such a lovely time! I never had a pleasanter visit in all my life, and I do appreciate all that you and sweet Mrs. Professor have done for me. Uncle Fritz may be able to find some way of returning some of the kindness. But, there is something you don't know."

More than one among the passengers in the car recognized the fine head of Professor von Holsneck, and pointed out the great man as a person to be seen once in a lifetime; but to those who beheld him and had known of his mighty intellect alone, he was to appear in a new character. He might have been the simplest traveller of them all, journeying into green pastures along with a favorite grandchild, so unpretending and joyous was he. For, great as he was, — because he was so great, it may be, — he had learned the happy secret of being true to the nature God had given him, and of tossing aside care like a useless garment, whenever he dared take time from his grave labors for a bit of rest.

Octave found him as companionable as Fritzy, and far more so than Paula would have been on such a trip. Her tongue rattled from one subject to another with humming-bird swiftness, if not with so much of grace. Professor von Holsneck found her infinitely diverting, and grew brighter and more rested as the distance lessened; but it was not till they were almost ready to leave the train that Octave treated him to a full account of

her "running away," and the puzzle she had left for her family to solve.

"But, my dear child, if you had told me that last night, I would have relieved their anxiety by a telegram."

"Don't you see? I do not want it relieved. It is n't every day I have a chance to do things out of the common, and you would n't have had the heart to disappoint me when I did, would you?"

"I certainly would!" replied the professor, laughing.

"Oh! Then it is well I did n't tell. Paula will be just dying to know what I have done and where I have been; but you see she is n't to know, yet; neither she nor anybody. This is a *Mystery* — a capital-letter MYSTERY! And it is n't to be divulged until we are all ready for the *denouement*. See?"

"Not very clearly, my dear."

"Oh, bother!— I don't mean that saucily, but because there is so little time to explain. We don't wish anybody to know anything about what Melville hopes or what he may have discovered until he is all ready to test it. When

you are sure, — perfectly, perfectly sure, — and it has been tried in other ways ever so many times, then he is to try it on himself; when the great surgeon says the time has come. We want him to show his courage and get his fame all at once — in a blaze of glory! Poor laddie! he has n't had many blazes of glory, but he 's had lots of blazing tempers! He 's almost as spunky as I am. So, when we get to The Snuggery, you are to be — HE, I am a HEROINE, and this is part of my romance. I just have astonished Paula Pickel for once in my life, and I don't want you to go and spoil the fun. You won't, will you?"

"Not if I can help it," answered the *savant*, enjoying the nonsense like a boy. "But I may do so unintentionally."

"I sha'n't let you. If you go to say anything you should not, I will frown; and when I frown, you are to stop short off, no matter what it is."

"That is destined to make me appear very silly, I fear. I shall be sure to say the thing you do not wish."

"I think not; and you won't mind being rather

silly for once, when you are so very wise most of the time, will you?"

"I don't know about the wisdom, my dear. I often feel as if I had but learned the alphabet of wisdom, and that most imperfectly."

The professor's tone had become grave, and of the truth of his conviction there could be no doubt. Octave looked at him in astonishment.

"Why, Professor von Holsneck! If you are not wise, who in this world is?"

"The more we learn the greater is the vista of knowledge which opens before us. What I have gained in understanding is as nothing, nothing, to that I could desire, and, being almost at the end of life, that I must leave unknown; unless, indeed, in that other life I shall be permitted to advance forever."

"Then — what must you think of poor me!" cried Octave, abashed at last by a thought of her own acquirements in comparison with his.

"That you are a very charming child," responded the great man, so heartily and affectionately that her smiles returned.

When they had reached their station, and had

been driven up the mountain side in one of the lumbering stages which were on hand for the accommodation of stray passengers, their talk reverted to Germany and the son of the professor, who was still there, prosecuting his studies in art, and whose attainments seemed, to judge by the fond parent's talk, to be something wonderful indeed.

The truth was, that Octave had walked straight into the deepest corner of his heart by her swift recognition of a humble scene which that absent son had depicted on his canvas, and had sent across the sea to convince his father that the absence was not unfruitful of good result. An artist's career had been the last the professor would have chosen for his boy; but he was wise enough to let each nature work out its own salvation in its own way. "A good artist would have been a spoiled scientist," he had philosophically reasoned with himself; though his disappointed hopes were sometimes still hard to bear. So, when Octave's ignorant tongue had told him that the boy had been right, he had been better pleased than if she had brought him a costly offering.

Seeing it pleased him, if not wholly understanding why, the girl had gone on to describe in detail all the familiar scenes in which her previous summers had been passed; and the description brought the absent son's present environment in clearest view to the father's mental sight.

"Down the little path there by the gate, Hans always went of a morning with his tin dinner-pail, and his spade or shovel over his shoulder, the little best room, — I know that is the one they have given your boy, — the great bed stands so and so; and there is an old black chest of drawers. In those, I should n't wonder but he keeps all his pictures, and wet sketches, to get them out of the dust. Gretchen is eternally stirring up a dust, you must know, and then laying it down again with a wet rag. Paula used to sketch in oils, and she and Gretchen were always in a riot on account of the 'fuzz' sticking so to the paint. She used to threaten putting her horrid daubs in the chest then, but I would n't let her. I was n't going to have my Sunday frock spoiled and smutched by green and yellow spots, would you?"

"No, I would not," responded the professor, heartily, if absently. He was seeing, at that very moment, the little Dutch bed-chamber and his happy, careless lad, putting away with the forethought he exercised only upon his "work" the half-finished sketch he had just been over the hill to make. Octave laughed, and her laugh recalled the old man to the actual, and to the knowledge that their stage had drawn up before the white palings of an old-fashioned house, in whose wide door-way a group of curious young faces were pictured.

"We're here!" said Octave, springing down and standing with a great show of dignity, while the professor clambered after her.

Then they walked up the gravel path together, and just before the group of watchers Octave paused.

"You see, I did come back; and this is — HE!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AUNT RUTH was in great perplexity. She did not intend to let her mother see that she was but when had her tell-tale countenance ever hidden anything from the eyes which watched it so closely and fondly?

So it was of no avail that she sat quietly down with her sewing, by the open window of their pleasant apartment at the sea-side hotel where they were staying, and tried to look indifferent. Mother Amy's gentle voice broke the stillness at once.

"What is it, Ruth?"

"How does thee know that there is anything? I mean — what does thee mean?"

"What is troubling thee, my child?" asked the old lady, smiling at Ruth's confusion.

"The old subject, Mother Amy."

"Surely, not my health. The Lord has been very good to me. I have promise of living yet awhile, to do His work; if so pleases Him."

"No, not thy health. If no one troubled me more than thee does, sweet mother, I should find life all too comfortable. It is the children — the 'pickles.'"

"Thee promised to leave care behind thee when we left The Snuggery, and thee has bravely tried to keep thy word, though it has been hard at times. What is new about them, now?"

"I have a letter from Rosetta which puzzles me. I don't know if thee is well enough to hear it, but I should like advice."

"Ruth, I am well; and thee shall have the advice for what it may be worth to thee."

Ruth drew a yellow envelope from her pocket. The letter which it contained was much messed and rumpled, and the blotches of ink were visible even across the room; so that to look upon it was painful to Grandmother Kinsolving's fastidious eyes. Evidently the writer had concocted the epistle with great labor and at broken intervals, and her unaccustomed fingers had found the task an almost impossible one.

The letter began, —

DEAR MAM, THAT IS RUTH:

I ain't a writin' this to the old laidy, becos I no that You don't want her to be Trobbled about the House and what's in it whilst she's away. Well thar hain't enny use of Worryin' I don't suppose; but I thort I 'd better jest rite an' tell ye, I mean thee, so as ye wouldn't hev no call ter blame me fir what i couldn't noways pervent. i done the best i could an' that's the livin' truth an' i didn't no nothin' about it afore she went. but shecum back all rite an' fetched Him with her, an' i don't no no more what it means, an' the dead an' not so much as they sometimes sees into things we canst. i did think i wouldn't say nothing about it, an' then thinks i to my self thinks i if i Don't tell em nothin' an' they cum home an' finds it out, mebbe they'll blame me, an' no wonder. an' So i thort i'd rite a few lines to let yu no that i am well an' hope these few lines finds yu an' yours the same. He was shet up with him considable of a Spel, but they wan't no more eggsploshuns ner chloroforms so fur forth as i no. So no more at present from yours in respect of humbly,

ROSETTA PERKINS.

"Ruth! Ruth! give me the letter. Thee cannot have read it aright," said Mother Amy, laughing merrily; for her daughter had read the epistle through exactly as it had been written, without punctuation and with all the imperfect spelling accented as far as was possible to do so.

The daughter passed the paper over into her mother's hands and curiously watched her face while she endeavored to make its meaning intelligible.

"Well, and what does thee think of it? Can thee guess what mischief those young ones have been after now?"

"No; I cannot," said Mrs. Kinsolving, after a second and slower perusal. "It does not appear to be anything serious, however. I would not worry about it, if I were in thy place."

"How can I help it, mother?"

"How, indeed, my Ruth, till thee is made over new! Thee began to worry in thy cradle, and thee will keep it up until the end, I fear. I wish thee would not."

"There has been something going on that Rosetta has been troubled about."

"Rosetta is troubled about many things, from 'pie-crust to religion,' as thee has so often remarked. It is, likely, something about Abraham and the stock; and we have known Abraham's trustworthiness these many years, although Rosetta still feels a care over him as if he were a child."

No surer symptom of Grandmother Kinsolving's physical improvement could have been found than in her mirthfulness of mood; and

those who heard her light jests could easily see where Ruth had acquired her odd ways of looking at life. Mother Amy was religious to her heart's core, and the sweetness and gladness of her religion shone through her words and lovely features as the light within shines through an uncurtained window on a winter's night.

"Mother, if thee thinks thee is well enough to be left, I would like to take a run up to the farm and see with my own eyes if anything is amiss."

"Go, if thee likes, my child. I am certainly well enough; besides, in this kind family are many willing hands to do for me the slightest service I may require. The young serving-woman that has charge of our rooms appears to be fond of me. If her mistress is willing, thee might engage her to look after me in thy absence, and then both thee and I would feel safe and independent. As much as one human being can ever be independent of the souls around him," concluded the dear old lady, gravely.

So it was settled; and, hoping to be away from her post of love and duty but for a little while,

Ruth Kinsolving tied on her gray bonnet, and pinned her gray shawl about her shapely shoulders, and set off for home.

Some days had passed since Octave's disappearance in a "Mystery," and her no less strange reappearance with "Him"; but no explanation had she vouchsafed of the affair, and the curiosity which had succeeded anxiety remained in the breasts of the other young householders, to torment them with ever-growing strength.

Paula had written several letters to Aunt Ruth on the subject, but she was prudent and thoughtful by nature, and the recollection that no harm seemed to have come of the adventure, and that Aunt Ruth was easily disturbed, had restrained her from posting them. They still reposed in the bottom of her pretty writing-desk, ready for dispatching whenever it should seem advisable.

Even Content had been moved to interference, and had urged Octave first, and afterward Melville, to disclose the "Mystery"; but to all persuasions the "conspirators" turned a deaf ear.

"And won't you tell *me*, if I promise never-no-

never-s'long's-I-live to tell nobody else?" asked little Fritz, coaxingly. "Where'd you go to, Octave, and who was the old man what came home with you?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell, any how you fix it, dearie. I've promised Melville, and he's promised me; but by and by everybody will know. You must all be patient. Grandmother says that 'patience is a virtue.'"

"Does grandmother know?"

"No, indeed; that is, not about this."

"Nor Aunty Ruth?"

"Least of all!"

"But she does, though."

"She cannot, Fritz." How? The girls have all said that they would n't worry her about it, and Melville has n't — that I 'm sure of."

"She does, though."

"How, Fritzy?"

"Ho! I guess I won't. I'm a 'Mystery,' too!"

"You midget! You don't even know what a 'Mystery' is!"

"Yes, but I do. Paula and Content, they

hunted it out in the dic — dictionary book, and they told me when I asted them. I do know, so!"

"Tell me what it is, and I'll believe you understood."

"It's a pro— some kind of a secret."

"Humph! You're precocious!" said Octave, half vexed.

"I ain't no such a thing!"

"That does n't mean anything bad, Fritzy darling. It means that you are an unusually smart boy. See?"

"Oh, yes; I knew that. Abry-ham and Rosetta and all of 'em says that," answered the little lad, complacently.

"Fritz, your vanity is great."

"You tell me and I'll tell you," said the child, returning to the subject dearer to him just then than his own perfections.

"Fritz, if I would tell anybody, it would be you. But I cannot; I've promised, and I would n't break my word. I'm sure you could n't ask that, little brother."

"No," said Fritz, gravely, with sober memo-

ries of that dreadful time when he broke his own word, and so nearly forfeited his right to be a gentleman.

"But, if you have n't promised there is no reason why you should not tell me how Aunt Ruth heard what I did. I 'm sorry, for I don't want to worry her, even if I am all right in what I have done, and she will be proud of me when it is all over."

"Will she?" This was a new view of the case.

"I think so. Anyway, she 'll be 'as proud as proud' of Melville. So it won't matter so much about me."

"What 'll you give me?"

"A cent."

"'T ain't enough."

"Five cents."

"No, siree. I won't tell for less than a quarter."

"You mercenary little wretch! I have n't but ten cents to my name."

"Borry of Melville. He always has lots."

"I don't like to run in debt."

"Pshaw! How much have you got, anyway?"

Octave took out a very flat little porte-monnaie and emptied its contents into Fritzy's dirty, waiting palms. The amount was eleven cents and one bad German coin, which the little boy said he would take "in case it should be good sometime." Then, for value received, he imparted the information that "Rosetta wrote a letter. She wrote it with her tongue and her fingers, and making up faces the worsest that ever was! An' when it was done I drove to the post-office in my pony-cart, and mailed it, an' the postmaster he gave me a stamp, an' I licked it on." After which circumstantial evidence Octave concluded that there could be no doubt about the matter.

"Well, then all I have to say is, that first thing we know, Aunt Ruth will come home."

"Will she?" asked Fritz, eagerly. Then, as a shadow fell across the path, he looked up. "Ginger!" he cried; "there she is now!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

For an instant silence reigned; but it was not in the frank natures of either Octave or Fritz to tremble long before the apparition which had appeared so suddenly in their midst. Fritz flew to the arms outstretched to receive him with a genuineness of joy that was very sweet to Ruth's heart, and Octave's momentary hesitation vanished at the first kindly smile from her relative's lips.

"Dear Aunt Ruth, I am glad to see you, after all," she said, coming forward as Fritz was deposited upon the ground; and Ruth's clear gaze rested on the girl with fond surprise. She did not remember to have left Octave so well grown and fair of face; and yet a second's thought showed that no very great change could have been accomplished during the few weeks of her absence.

Fritz and Octave had been the aunt's favorites. She had not even attempted to deny that

fact to herself; there was something akin to her own outspoken nature in their characters, and it was with the most implicit confidence she believed that, whoever might have been misbehaving while she had been away, it could not be Octave.

Undoubtedly, Fritzy had been in scrapes innumerable; he could not exist without them; but the scrapes of a child "going on nine" are rarely very serious. Her mind naturally fell upon Paula, whom she liked least of all her nieces; and it was with a prejudgment that Paula had been trying something romantic and out of the common that she had returned to The Snuggery to investigate.

Paula, poor Paula! The irreproachable and really lovely girl, whose faults might be disagreeable because they touched so closely upon the faults of others, but who fully intended to be just perfect, and was all the time anxiously investigating her own motives, lest there should be some flaw therein.

The one fault of which the elder "Miss Pickel" had been most painfully self-conscience was her own selfishness and love of ease.

Wise Grandmother Kinsolving had seen this, and had put the girl at the head of affairs, believing that a position of trust would best counteract Paula's tendency to indolence and fault-finding. Mother Amy had found that congenial labor is a happy antidote to the poison of sin, and believed implicitly in the old "word" that "Satan still will find some task for idle hands to do." Well, then, whoever fell under the guidance of the far-seeing Friend was rarely left to be a victim of the evil spirit's wiles.

But, as soon as she heard that her aunt had arrived, Paula reflected with no small degree of pride on her excellent management. She considered that she had earned a right to be a bit self-complacent, since, during her brief reign, accidents had been fewer than usual, and "the children" had really acquitted themselves very well indeed.

So, delaying only long enough to complete the very pretty afternoon toilet she was making, "Miss Pickel" descended to receive her aunt, with what Uncle Fritz would have judged a very graceful greeting, and of which his loving heart would have been most proud.

But prejudiced Aunt Ruth saw only a prim little maiden, dressed far beyond the necessities of the occasion, and read in the momentary delay that dressing had occasioned the tardy welcome of one who was conscious of having something to hide.

Even the unobservant Christina noticed the coldness of the aunt's kiss, as compared with that she had bestowed on each of the others, who had not tarried for any toilet making before they bade her welcome home. As for Octave, she looked up in such visible surprise that honest Ruth was convicted of unfairness, and tried to remedy the mischief by scrupulous inquiries after Paula's health.

"I am perfectly well," answered Paula, thanking her relative sweetly, and inquiring in her own turn after their grandmother and her home-coming.

"She will not return for some time yet, if I can prevent it," answered Ruth, with considerable sternness. "She is used to quiet, and I should not like to have her improvement all for nothing, as it would be if she came back just yet."

"Will you have lunch or dinner now?" asked the deputy house-mistress, trying to be perfect in her behavior.

It was very odd, Ruth thought, to have anyone asking her in her own house if she would have something to eat, as if she had been a stranger; and somehow it did not strike her at all pleasantly. The pretty young Quakeress was, in reality, a little out of temper. She had been vexed at having to take this unexpected journey home, and, with her propensity for worrying, was already fancying a thousand evils which might have befallen her precious mother at the hands of that ignorant serving-maid to whom she had been entrusted.

"No, I am not hungry. It is not our habit to lunch at irregular hours; or it *was* not our habit, when I was mistress here. Where is Rosetta?"

"Gone to the village for an afternoon's visit," replied Paula, surprised in her turn by her aunt's tone, and more hurt by it than she would have cared to show.

At this news Octave rejoiced, for she preferred

telling her aunt as much of her "Mystery" affair as she was free to divulge, and not have the account garbled by any other's report. Oddly enough, her proceeding had never looked such a bold and strange one as it had during the few minutes since Aunt Ruth had returned.

"I wonder why I do feel so queer! I'm sure I did nothing wrong, nothing I would not do again, if I was placed in just such a position. And it is all coming out so beautifully, too. Oh, dear! How shall I get a chance to talk with her first!" thought Octave, growing more and more perplexed.

But presently Ruth's eyes begun to wander afresh around the apartment. There was one other who had failed in her welcome, and that the sweet-faced Content. Octave interpreted the glance in her quick way, and replied to it. "Oh, it's lamb and caper sauce this afternoon, Aunt Ruth. It 's the first tantrum Melville has had in some time. He really is the most improved boy—"

"There was plenty of room for it," interrupted Ruth, grimly. "What was the 'tantrum' about?"

Octave colored. She could not answer without involving somebody else in possible blame, and that one she who, strangely enough, seemed already to have incurred it. Had the family been asked who would have the best record to show the absent house-mistress upon her return, the answer would have been unanimous, "Paula." It was incomprehensible, yet it seemed true, that now Paula was the only one found wanting in favor.

"What was the 'tantrum' about, Octave? Thee must tell me."

"It was a trifle, Aunt Ruth. If you please, I would rather not tell."

"As thee likes. Christina, then."

But Christina, the peace lover, was frightened. She tell tales of anybody! Least of all, of Melville and Paula!

The affair was really, as Octave had said, one of the slightest import; but because of their hesitation it grew to assume tremendous consequence in Ruth's mind. There was evidently something they all wished to hide, and a very natural feeling of resentment filled her heart. Here, in her

own home, over which, under the gentle supervision of her mother, she had reigned supreme during all her maiden life, she was flouted by a parcel of young creatures who had intruded upon her peace, uninvited, and unconscious, even, of that intrusion, They seemed so to take it for granted that she was as pleased to have them there as they had been to come! and she did not like it at all; she had only received them because her mother had said it was right.

"Well, if none will tell, then I will go and learn from Melville himself. He has faults enough, but he is not afraid to give an answer when it is demanded."

With that, and with a motion which seemed to impart to the rustling gray gown which clothed her tall figure an air of great austerity, Ruth led the way to the cripple's room. Scarcely knowing whether they were wanted or not, but with the natural curiosity of their age, the others followed in a body.

"Hello, Aunt Ruth! When did you come to town?" was Melville's rather disrespectful salutation.

"I came home this afternoon. I am pleased to see thee in such fine spirits. I had heard that thee was in a 'tantrum.'"

"Oh, I was, a little while ago; but Content has cured me. She's a great pacifier of family strife, Aunt Ruth."

"I know that," replied the aunt, kissing with fervency the niece who had sprung to her side in glad surprise. "Our little Content is always right."

"Scuse me, Aunt Ruthy, but she is n't. She told a story one day."

"O Fritzy, I think that could not be!"

"Yep; she told me so her own self; did n't you, Content?"

"Yes, I did tell him so, Aunt Ruth; but it was not here that I was guilty of the sin. We were comparing notes, and finding out that everybody does wrong, even though they do not mean to," said Content, in her low voice and with a painful flush on her fair cheek. It was one thing to be confidentially sympathetic with Fritzy, in the privacy of her own room and the sacredness of a Sunday afternoon chat; it was quite another to

have her fault published "on the housetop" as it were, and as a sort of send-off to her aunt's unexpected return.

"Well, I declare!" said Octave, suddenly. Then stopped, as if she had forgotten herself.

"Thee declares what, Octave?" asked Ruth, sharply, and sitting suddenly down upon the foot of Melville's lounge.

"I don't know how to say it, but something appears to have come over all of us and set us all by the ears, just the minute you came in."

It was an unfortunate speech, and Octave swiftly recognized the fact; but she could see no way of setting it right, so perforce she left it.

"I am not accustomed to setting people 'by the ears,' Octave; and if thee and thy sisters are disturbed by my coming there must be some reason for it. I may as well tell all that I had a very peculiar letter from Rosetta Perkins, and it is that has sent me home on this flying visit."

Melville caught the word "flying," and, in his relief that it was only such an one, he winked at Octave. Aunt Ruth intercepted the wink and the swift glance of sympathy which answered it.

More than ever was she convinced that there was mischief afoot, and that she was none too soon upon the scene.

"Aunt Ruth, did you bring Rosetta's letter with you?" asked Octave, so suddenly that the other replied without thinking.

"Yes, I think it is in my hand-bag."

"Will you let us see it?"

"For what reason?"

"Because it seems to have made mischief. There is something wrong somewhere, and I, for one, don't know where; but I should like to. If I see what she has said, then I can tell just how to straighten it out."

Ruth was sorely puzzled; but she smiled at Octave's ingenuous confession that she desired to fix things up to suit the occasion; yet someway she did not misconstrue it, nor in any degree include her favorite in the general blame.

"Thee can read the letter if thee chooses; read it aloud. But thee is not likely to make much sense out of it. I could not, therefore I came home."

Miss Kinsolving took the letter from her

satchel and gave it to Octave, who attempted to read it aloud, as she had been directed. But the feat, for that fun-loving girl, was an impossibility. She would enunciate a few word and then stop to laugh, which, in itself, would have been confusing, had the epistle been most carefully worded; but, composed as it was and ambiguous in the extreme, the others found the suspense more than they could endure; so it was finally handed over to Content, and she managed to get through it after a fashion.

"But what does it all mean?" asked that girl, smilingly.

"It means, as far as I can translate it, that there has been some strange occurrence here. Something that would not have happened if mother and I had been at home. I have come here, as I told thee, to find out what it is. Paula, thee is the eldest. What has happened that should not?"

Paula did not answer. Her eye unconsciously flew to Octave, and then dropped upon the carpet. Her new habit of self-denial would not allow her to convict her sister.

Ruth frowned. "What is it, Content?"

But poor Content flushed and paled, yet neither would she reply; that is, in such terms as her aunt desired. "I would rather not tell, Aunt Ruth."

"Then thee acknowledges there is something, and thee knows what that something is?"

"Ye-es," said Content.

"I shall get to it, then; Fritzy, what has happened?"

"I run Don into the side of the stable and barked his sides all off."

It was a relief for all to laugh; the confession was made in such honest trepidation, for Fritz knew that old Don was the "apple of his Aunt Ruth's eye."

"Christina, will thee tell me?"

The gentle tone assumed when she was addressed sent soft-hearted little Christina into a flood of tears.

"Melville?"

"Wild horses won't drag it out of me, Aunt Ruth."

"Then, Paula, I shall hold thee responsible.

Thee was left in charge. Come with me to my room. I will hear thy story there."

"Wait, Aunt Ruth; there is no blame to be put upon anybody but me. I, Octave, was what 'happened'; I always am, you know."

There was visible relief in all the faces of the group, save that of the self-accused. Yes, and save in that of Aunt Ruth herself. At that instant it was perfectly evident to all that the judgment which would be meted out to Octave would be far more lenient than it would have been in any other case.

An expression of keenest regret stole over the young Friend's features; and a look of astonishment that cut Octave to the heart. But she did not gaze upon it long, for, with an impetuous rush, she fell upon Ruth's neck and hid her face on the gray-clad shoulder. "Yes, Aunt Ruth; and I am sorry; but I should do it again, just the same. No, I mean, not perhaps not the same—but, oh, dear! I—I believe, upon my word, I'm crying; and I'm sure I don't know why!"

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE by one the cousins who could do so passed out of the room, leaving Melville, who could not go had he wished, as sole witness of the interview between Ruth and Octave.

The sight of the merry Octave in tears was one so unusual and so depressing that little Fritz set up a dismal wail, which Christina checked her own more silent grief to soothe.

"Never mind, little brother; Aunt Ruthy loves Octave ever so! She'll not scold her very hard for running away and being a heroine."

"But she will! And Octave cried! I never, no never, all my life long, saw my Octave a-cryin'. I — I wish the old thing had staid to home; so there!"

"But this is her home, Fritz; and it is you and I who have put her out of it. That's what Luke said. He said we 'kerried on so like possessed' that we 'jest clean druv' grandmother and Aunt Ruth away."

"It's no sech a thing! An' I'll tell Luke Tewksbury so to his old face!" retorted Fritz, indignantly, and forgetting to cry. "He's a mean boy. He hitched my mare up to the harvest-wagon and said she had got to draw a — 'bout twenty tons of stuff. He did, so."

Christina did not dispute the assertion, and the picture of the tiny pony hitched before a lumber wagon was one that elicited her keenest sympathy.

"Well, never mind, dear; he did n't really do it, and you can ask Aunt Ruth to make Luke stop teasing you. I am glad she has come home, though it did seem so sort of upsetting at first. She 'll straighten out all the crooked things, I fancy, she 's a 'powerful hand to manage,' Rosetta says."

Don's bray coming to his ears at that moment diverted the thoughts of Fritz from anything unpleasant, and he rushed out of doors to try a bare-back ride. This was a feat he had never yet accomplished, but which he daily attempted with an enthusiasm and courage worthy of a better cause. "Fritzy, he never gins up licked,"

was Abraham's as daily comment; and this was uttered in an indescribable tone, which seemed to put the child to a greater determination than ever.

"Take care, Fritzy," called Christina; "don't go and hurt yourself just as Aunt Ruth has come home"; which suggested that it would not be so much of a matter if he did so at other times.

Paula and Content slipped arms about each other's waists and wandered off between the box-bordered flower-beds in the old garden. Of late, they had found many things in common, of likes and dislikes; and it had grown to be "the girls," whenever they were spoken of in the household. Slowly ripening friendships are safest; and that of the elder cousins had grown gradually enough; but now it promised to equal that of names famous in history.

"What can I have done to vex Aunt Ruth!" cried Paula, wistfully. "I never thought so much about doing just right in my life as I have done since grandmother went away; but the harder I try the worse things appear to go."

"You have done right, dear Paula; and Aunt

Ruth will be the first to see she was mistaken in laying any blame to you. She is so honest she will tell you so, or else I am very much mistaken. But what in the world Octave ever went away like that for, and why she went, is just as much a puzzle to me as ever. Aunt Ruth will get the truth out of her, though, if it is possible."

"What do you mean? Octave would not tell a lie to save herself any amount of blame."

"Of course, I know that; but what the 'Mystery' is, and why there should be any 'Mystery,' is more than I see. Aunt Ruth will find out what it is."

"It's between Melville and Octave. One is as deep in it as the other. And I have a suspicion, but I don't know what gave it to me, either."

"A suspicion of what?"

"I think that he has thought of something, or invented something that she went away to see about. And that old gentleman who came home with her is in the plot, too. I wonder who he was! Not much of anybody, though, I fancy; he was so very plain and quiet."

Meanwhile, behind the closed door of Mel-

ville's room, Octave was undergoing a cross-examination which tried her ardent soul to the uttermost. Time and time again she was on the point of giving out and divulging the "Mystery"; but as often was she restrained by the thought of the brilliant climax she hoped to achieve. She had promptly dried her tears, and looked up bravely into the kind, questioning face above her, and Aunt Ruth thought she had never seen anything sweeter than the frank young countenance into which she looked back.

"You see, Aunt Ruthy, it's just this way. People can hold their tongues even if they do want to tell things, if they think that some good is to be gained by it. Some great good is to be gained by my keeping still."

"Good to whom, Octave?" The aunt had found a deeper perplexity, even, than she had imagined.

"For Melville first, and afterward for all of us. Wouldn't you be proud of him, if you should suddenly find him the most famous boy of his age, of this age, I mean?"

"Thee knows very well that I should be proud

of him or of any one who does a noble thing. Fame is not always nobility; nor is notoriety fame. I should not want either thee or him to do anything for the mere sake of making peoples' tongues wag."

"Aunt Ruth, we're all in a 'mix-up,' as Fritzy says. In the first place, I am going to tell tales for once, so as to clear up that about the 'tantrum.' Or, will you, Melville? It is n't fair that you should think it was Paula."

"But it was Paula, to begin with," answered Melville, angrily. "She has such a terrible weight of care on her shoulders, that she must needs come in here and go to upsetting my things 'to straighten them,' she says. She has n't the least idea of what value they are; and she turned out some of my papers that will cost me hours to do over again; and they must be done, because I promised the professor —"

"Melville, take care!" warned Octave.

Ruth's ear had caught the word. As she knew but one professor with whom Melville had any acquaintance, and as he was thousands of miles away when last she had heard of him, her interest was freshly aroused.

"The professor? Has thee heard from him?"

"Yes, I have had three letters from him," proudly replied the invalid, quite thrown off his guard. "I have put them away in the most careful place, now; but it was one of those that I thought Paula had destroyed, as well as my 'calculations.' Think of my having, really having them written to *me*, too, three letters from a man so famous!"

"Humph! I did not know that the professor was so great. He seemed to me a dreamer and a rather insignificant person altogether. What is he doing now?" asked Miss Kinsolving, with her mind quite upon the wrong person.

"Why, Aunt Ruth! You cannot read the papers much! What is he not doing for science and the world? Think of all the wonderful helps to suffering people he has thought of in that one brain of his! Oh, it's grand, grand! And to think that Mel—"

"Octave, take care!" warned the boy in his turn, but with eyes shining from the enthusiasm her words had aroused.

Ruth looked from one to the other, and with

an expression so dismayed that Octave could not refrain from laughing.

"Excuse me, Aunt Ruthy; but you do look so bothered, and it is all so splendid, if you only knew! Won't you just step out into the other room, and let me talk the thing over with Melville for a minute? Then I can know just how much to tell, and what I should not."

This was certainly a novel proposition from a girl to her guardian; but Octave's earnestness disarmed it of offence. All that Ruth did ejaculate was a characteristic "Humph!" but the tone in which it was uttered said volumes.

"I know, Aunt Ruthy, it does seem dreadful saucy, and all that; but I don't see how I am to help it. I am so sorry you came home; no — I mean I 'm glad, of course, for I love you; but if you had n't come, it — "

"It would have been more convenient for thee," finished Miss Kinsolving, smiling in spite of her determination to be stern; also, in spite of her determination not to do anything of the kind, obediently walking out into the hall and standing there like a child in a game, while her compan-

ions behind the door deliberate as to her further mystification.

Certainly, the truth that earnestness bears its own force was never more fully exemplified. After a very brief consultation, the door was opened and the lady invited to reënter.

"Well, Aunt Ruth, there is nothing we can tell you, except that which Rosetta tried to write. I think that she meant this: Ten days ago I went to New York."

"Octave! Alone?"

"Why, yes, ma'am; who was there to go with me?"

"But why?"

"On the happiest errand of my life. I am the proudest girl you ever saw; though I am, even in this case, 'only Octave.' Did you ever hear of Professor Edric von Holsneck?"

"All the world has heard of him. What has he to do with thee and me?"

"Everything. I went to New York to see him."

"Octave Pickel!" cried Aunt Ruth, in her amazement; and could say no more.

"Yes, and just as soon as he heard that my name *was* Octave Pickel he welcomed me with both hands, literally and figuratively."

Ruth sank back in her chair and fanned herself with a palm-leaf she had picked up from the carpet. Her astonishment certainly made her speechless, till she reflected that after all it was not so strange. She had heard that the firm of "Pickel & Pickel" were Professor von Holsneck's German publishers.

"Ah! thee knew him, then; that was different; but I hope thee did not go uninvited, and that thee will intrude thyself upon no one without first consulting older persons."

"No, aunt; I did not know him at all. I had only heard of him, as you or anybody else has. But I had to see him on business. It was a sort of case of 'Mahomet and the mountain.' The mountain — that's Melville — could n't go to Mahomet, so I went down and commanded the prophet to come to the mountain, and he came."

"Madcap! Does thee mean to tell me that that great man has been beneath this roof, — been here in The Snuggery?"

"Beneath this very roof, here in this very Snuggery; sitting in that very chair where you sit now."

"Oh! Oh!" gasped Miss Kinsolving; and in such dismay as to send them all off again into a fit of laughter, which on her part arose from nervousness, but on the young folks's from pure delight.

"But, Aunt Ruth, you are the only person privileged to know that. In this benighted household my blessed professor is known only as —HE! HE is a part of a splendid Mystery, which even you cannot be told, till the time is ripe. We have told you already more than we intended, and more than any one else is to know, perhaps for several weeks. When it is all accomplished" — here Octave smiled most encouragingly upon Melville, who suddenly appeared to turn pale — "everybody will congratulate everybody, and everything will be so beautiful! Please, Aunt Ruth, don't tell Paula Pickel nor any of the others what we have told you. Let them just live on and wonder who HE is, and what HE is or was doing here. And won't you

just be real nice to Paula? That girl has made a martyr of herself to 'duty' ever since you have been away; and I should have been here to look after my boy when she came in, then there would n't have been any 'tantrum.' But 'tantrums' are n't anything. They 're only a sympton of — genius. That is what the great man — HE — called your Melville. Oh, I tell you, Ruth Kinsolving, this family is bound to be known to fame; and all on account of this young snapping-turtle here, that is as rightly named Capers as I am Pickel. Content we call the 'lamb,' and when the capers are a little too spicy we send her in to get the sauce spread over a mild surface. See?"

The day following, when Ruth entered her mother's room again, that observant person remarked that "the change has done thee a great deal of good. I never saw thee looking brighter in thy life, my daughter. That tells me without asking that thee found everything as it should be at home."

"I certainly have had a thorough 'change,' Mother Amy; and I have been considerably

'stirred up.' But whether everything is as it should be, that I am not prepared to say. I was never so puzzled in my life; and I never heard of such children."

"They *are* good children, only a bit more sprightly than common"; returned the grandmother, fondly. "I shall be glad when thee thinks it is best for me to go back to them."

Ruth sighed profoundly. She was conscious already of a sort of homesick feeling to be living again amidst all that overflowing life which had taken possession of The Snuggery and practically driven her out of it.

Mother Amy looked up from her knitting once more. "Thy brow is frowning, and thee looks even more perplexed than when thee went away, Ruth; but brighter and gayer."

"Yes, mother, it did do me good, I think; but—"

"I hope the children have not been doing anything rash."

"Doing! Rash! Mother Amy, think of the most unlikely thing in the world, and then make up thy mind that those children have done it. Even then thee will be far short of the mark."

CHAPTER XX.

A "MYSTERY" is not healthful for any one; even when the secret originates in brains as youthful as Octave's; and though it did not solve the problem for the household, yet the visit of Miss Kinsolving had somewhat the effect of a thunder-storm upon a murky atmosphere. Certainly, after her few words of apology and approbation to Paula, that painstaking girl felt too happy to pay any further attention to the vagaries of the "conspirators," Melville and Octave; Content had her thoughts drawn from it by the arrival of fresh letters and parcels from Japan; Christina was deep in some new volumes of old-time fairy tales, which her aunt had substituted for Luke's story papers; and little Fritz lived mostly out of doors.

So if the "Mystery" did not die, the interest of those not immediately connected with it did die; and The Snuggery, for several consecutive days, appeared as the abode of perfect peacefulness.

"There is somethin' boun' ter happen!" said Rosetta to Abraham. "Whenever them young-ones is still a minute it's 'cause they're a-hatchin' out fresh monkey-shines. They hain't any on 'em done nothin' out o' the beaten track this week er more. Not since Miss Ruth was to home."

"Wall, I should n't think ye'd hanker to hev 'em step off the 'beaten track,' as ye tell about. I've noticed that when they does step off they mostly steps a good pace. There was Octavy, now, who'd ever thort of a gal a-turnin' a hull hay-riggin' over on top of her; but she done it an' come out purty near as good as ever. Reckon she is — jest as well as she was afore, an' 'pears ter be gettin' as plump as a pa'tridge. But Pauly, she don't never seem to get inter no scrapes, like the rest on 'em."

"Humph!" retorted Rosetta, drawing off the yellow buttermilk for Abraham to carry away to the pigs. "She got inter one the very fust night she arriv'. She scairt the life clean out o' poor Mis' Capers, but you seem ter fergit thet."

"I hain't hed no chance ter fergit it, bein's ye

keep talkin' 'bout it. But don't ye worry; this here Sunday-meetin' sort of doin's ain't a goin' ter last long enough ter hurt us. My! but that buttermilk is rich!" And, wiping his lips on his shirt-sleeve, the farmer walked away stywards.

It is rarely safe to prophesy evil. It seemed as if the very mention of "scrapes" was enough, in that household, to induce one.

All summer long the pigs, which were the pride of Abraham's heart, had been allowed to run about in some fields, and get their living pretty much as they would have done in a native state. But haying was over, and the good man had more time to devote to his "stawk" than he had had during that busy season just past. It appeared to him time to begin "fattenin'," and that very day he had driven the pigs into a near-by enclosure, intending to shut them into their pens at night and feed them there.

For that purpose he had collected all the buttermilk Rosetta had to spare, and, walking noiselessly along over the grass-grown path, he raised the pail to the top of the high, board fence above the trough and emptied the contents in one mighty swish.

Though his eyes had been diverted by the gambols of some kittens in a tree, his feet had "almost gone theirselves" over the familiar way which led to the "fattening" quarters of many pigs departed long since, and it was an almost mechanical motion which had emptied the pail.

There was nothing mechanical, however, about the yells and shrieks which followed, nor in the tremendous jump which Abraham's long limbs made backwards. The startled man stumbled over a milking-stool which he had also brought along, and landed beneath the kittens' tree with a thud which sent them shying still farther upwards.

Then two heads appeared over the sty-wall, and two very red and angry faces gleamed from amid a flood of thick and clinging buttermilk.

"By the jingo!" cried Luke, in the accents of a story-paper hero. But his feelings were not at all story-paper-like, nor his further language that which would have been most approved.

"What in the name of apple-sass be ye a-doin' thar?" demanded Abraham, as soon as he had

picked himself up, and recognized the drenched persons as Luke and little Fritz.

"Why can't ye mind yer own business?" retorted the angry Luke.

"I was. I was a-feedin' the pigs — an' if so be that ye belongs amongst 'em, all right. Ye 've had yer supper." And chuckling quietly to himself, the busy man stalked off, leaving his victims to recover their tempers and their cleanliness at their leisure.

"Jest as I was a tellin' ye, Rosetty, ye need n't ha' worrited. Some kinks was a-boun' ter happen. Thar was that lazy houn', Luke, a settin' in the pig-sty, an' Fritzy alongside on him. I doused 'em both with buttermilk, an' on your 'count I 'm sorry, 'cause I s'pose ye 'll hev the youngun ter clean. But I ain't sorry noways elst. I s'picioned that boy of mine was a readin' them air yarns ter Fritzy, 'cause the little chap he 's full of the oddest kind o' sayin's ye ever heerd; an' now I 've kotched him. You lay it down, Luke Tewkskury won't git no great chanst in the futur' ter waste Mis' Kinsolving's time a readin' trash, not whilst I 'm his daddy! If he

wants ter be sentimental, I 'll gin him a chanst ter be, a-plowin' that ten-acre lot."

This was all quite true, as Abraham had surmised. The disused pig-sty, shady and grass-grown, had formed a capital and unsuspected hiding-place for the fiction-loving Luke to while away an hour of time, nor did he know that it was so soon to be occupied by its natural tenants; and after Christina's refusal to read any more of his exciting tales, he had turned to Fritz for sympathy, filling that youngster's mind with the strangest muddle of stuff which ever floated through a little brain.

Fortunately, but a fraction of all he heard was comprehended, and a smaller fraction yet it was which remained to puzzle and excite the always excitable and, till now, carefully reared child.

A tiny seed of evil stayed, — so small that no one would have dreamed it could ever have worked him ill. It was the idea of "ghosts." Not ghosts as they are usually considered, nor at all as they appeared to the impressible soul of Luke. A "ghost," young Tewksbury would no

sooner have tackled than a regiment of soldiers, and his own predilection was for "burglars." Had he known it, "ghosts" and "burglars" meant, to Fritz, one and the same thing; and both he and his instructor longed for a chance to show their prowess and "have a fight with one." Luke felt himself a hero of the deepest dye, and what Fritz thought of his own capacity to meet any and every emergency can be imagined.

Both were to have an opportunity of proving their own merits, and it came speedily on the heels of that buttermilk episode.

Luke slept in the house, though his father lodged at their own cottage, some little distance away. Sometimes Fritz was allowed to share Luke's pleasant apartment, especially when there was a hunting trip in contemplation; for, young as he was, it had been one of Uncle Fritz's requests that the little boy should be allowed the use of fire-arms, believing, it may be wisely, that if one is early trained to them, there is less danger of accident than when left to find out their use by lonely experiment. Luke was a "crack shot," and game on the mountain was abundant.

Fritz had already won a fair record, — for "going on nine," — and he was ambitious of further achievements.

The lads, big and little, went to bed, and soon to sleep; Fritz's small rifle and Luke's pistol lying ready at hand against an early waking. But visions of white, drenching floods, burglars, and ghosts mingled with little Fritz's dreams; induced in great measure by an unusually bountiful supper which Rosetta had given him as a consolation for his accident, and partly by their having sat up quite late to finish a most thrilling tale and to taste of a lunch which had been put up for their out-of-door breakfast.

"If we eat it over-night, we 'll make sure of it," said Luke, facetiously. He was always hungry, and Fritz was not to be outdone in that or any other matter by any big boy living. So he ate as long as he could, and then he dreamed as fast as he could; and in the midst of both, it always afterwards seemed to him, he had sat up in bed and seen Luke at the window, looking out with a very mysterious air.

"What is it, Lukey?"

"Whis–st! Bu–ur–gla–rs!"

Fritz could almost hear Luke's teeth chatter.

"Cracky! I bet he's afraid! Abry-ham said he would be, if a real one came to town. I ain't, though. I'm a gentleman. Gentlemen ain't never afraid of nothin'. Pooh! I'll show him!"

Creeping so softly out of bed in his bare feet that his companion did not hear him, he seized his little rifle and cautiously crept to the other open window.

On the grass below, a white figure was moving slowly about, in a vague sort of fashion, which, had either protector of the defenceless been wiser, he would have known belonged neither to any burglar nor ghost which ever troubled the repose of the peaceful.

Luke's own weapon was poised, but he was so nervous and intensely excited that he delayed to fire; else would the tragedy have been great. But while he paused to steady himself, crack went the other rifle, and down dropped the "ghost."

Then and there arose such shrieks and screams

as no burglar or disembodied spirit ever uttered, and which drove Luke in despair to hide his head beneath the bed-clothes, and Fritz to stand and gaze with rueful, half-dazed wonder upon one —two — three — a whole yard full of ghosts!

CHAPTER XXI.

FRITZY'S face showed traces of recent tears, but his valiant air not even tears could subdue. He stood by Dr. Winslow's side, affectionately resting one arm across the gentleman's shoulder, and with the other surreptitiously wiping his besmeared and stubby little nose.

The doctor tried to look grave, but the effort resulted only in a mixed expression of fun and seriousness. To his mind, small Fritzy was a "delicious child," infinitely diverting after the many grave cares which weighed upon the heart of the country physician, to whom each patient was like an old friend, therefore to be worried over beyond a mere professional interest in an unknown patient.

The doctor was always glad of an excuse to stop at The Snuggery; but he had been exceedingly anxious that night, when he had been summoned thither.

"Luke and Fritz have been shooting folks,"

was the breathless message Octave delivered, having run all the way between houses to give it.

"Shooting folks, Miss Octave! What in the name of common-sense!" and the kind face had worn an expression of terrible dismay. "Shooting whom?"

"Oh, nobody but Paula; I don't believe they hurt her, either, but she does n't seem just right or she won't talk, and — and — you 'll come right away, quick, won't you?"

"At once. Fortunately, the brown mare is already harnessed, for I had but just come in, and had let her stand to cool off. Jump in with me, and tell me on the way all about it."

Octave promptly obeyed, and her tongue flew fast for a few seconds. When she had finished, the doctor asked, "Has any one been really wounded?"

"I do not believe so; though Rosetta declares that Paula must be, somewhere. I think she is terribly frightened, and it has made her faint. Who would n't be that, to be shot at by a couple of boys, just because you were walking in your sleep!"

"Who, indeed!" exclaimed the physician, sympathetically, and drove the faster.

From which it was evident that the burglar-ghost had been only poor Paula, taking one of her nocturnal, somnambulistic exercises; and that when Octave had missed her sister from their room, she had set out in pursuit of her. Likewise had little Christina, who, lying awake on her own small bed, had seen Paula pass the door, and had sleepily murmured, "She's walking again, and I must get up and follow her." Likewise Content, who had learned the family habit of care over the unfortunate victim of somnambulism. Ditto Rosetta, whose burdened soul had never known peaceful rest since the Kinsolvings went away and left the "pickles" in her charge.

No wonder that Fritz had seen a "whole yard full of ghosts"; for none of the pursuers had stopped to cover their white night-robes with anything less gleaming; and no wonder that each and every female throat had emitted the shrillest scream of which it was capable, on receiving an attack from fire-arms.

But "all is well that ends well," and when the

doctor had duly examined each "spook" separately, he found nothing more serious than a very bad fright to all, with a faintness on Paula's part, which was easily accounted for by the shock of her sudden awaking.

"I'm sure to goodness she is hit some'eres, though," declared Rosetta, even in the face of professional assurance to the contrary. "That little boy has shot more things 'an ye could shake a stick at; he's allays a pepperin' sunthin'; only day afore yisterday he aimed to kill a chipmonk an' hit my Plymouth rooster."

"Stuff and nonsense, Rosetta! That ought to prove to you that he did n't hit Paula — since he deliberately aimed at her. Any way, he only shot a hole through her very best night-dress, which she had no business to be wearing every day, and served her right," cried Octave.

"Is this so, Fritzy?" asked the doctor, despairing of convincing Rosetta that things were not so terrible after all. "Do you practise shooting at that rate?"

"Well, I'm kind of out of practice now, but I used to hit a tack, a carpet tack, forty feet

away," answered the boy, with boastful assurance.

"Indeed! That was doing well," exclaimed the amused physician.

Suddenly the boy pulled out a small pistol, and before the doctor quite comprehended what he was after, aimed at the opposite door and fired. The bullet missed its mark, but Fritz walked across to the casement, and examined it with interest. "See? See there? That's where she went through!" The grubby little forefinger traced a diminutive crack at the point where he fancied the bullet had vanished. "Must ha' gone clear through!"

"I think it went 'clear though'—the open window; but, Fritz, I hope you are not in the habit of carrying fire-arms. It is a very dangerous thing to do."

"Well, I never did carry 'em, and I guess I sha'n't begin now; though they ain't any danger. Pooh! It scares Rosetta 'most into fits jest to see a fire-arm."

The aged air of experience, and the manly contempt for feminine weakness was so amusing

to the doctor that he felt repaid for his night's trouble, just to have witnessed it. However, he decided to improve the opportunity by exercising the authority which Mrs. Kinsolving had placed in his hands when she left the Pickels for her sea-side sojourn. He had not used it theretofore, believing that undue restriction would only set the active young brains of his charges to inventing new and possibly more hazardous amusements than any of which he had heard; but the unrestrained use of rifles and pistols — that must be suppressed at once.

"You have come near doing great harm by your carelessness, little Fritz; and, as a reminder of it, I think I shall have to forbid your using your weapons any more, until some of your relatives return. I am sorry, but —"

"What makes you do it, then?" demanded Fritz, coolly interrupting what he foresaw would be a long lecture. If he had to be punished, he liked to be at once, and have done with it. He did n't like long-drawn ceremonies of any sort.

"For the good of the world at large," answered the physician; "now you skip to bed;

and I would advise that you sleep in your own apartment. I don't think Luke is the best intimate you could have found."

The mention of Luke brought the full force of the doctor's punishment to mind. "You mean — you mean I can't go hunting woodchucks to-morrow?"

"Not a woodchuck," laughed the doctor; but Fritz saw that the laugh covered a firm decision. His face fell as it had not done, even when bathed in tears over his possible wounding of his sister. Girls, in Fritz's estimation, were as plenty and about as valuable as blackberries; but — woodchucks! The tears with which he burrowed his curly head into his pillow five minutes later were bitter indeed.

Having convinced himself that nobody had suffered real damage, and having given Paula a simple restorative for her startled nerves, the weary physician rode away, and left the household at The Snuggery to get what rest it could.

But Octave could not sleep. There was that upon her mind which prevented. Yet this unusual state of things was not occasioned by

any anxiety about Paula, or that evening's experience. Finally, to lie still became impossible, and, rising, she wrapped herself in the counterpane from the bed she now enjoyed alone, since Paula, at the doctor's suggestion, had been promoted to the honor of occupying "grandmother's room." There she could sleep undisturbed as late as nature craved the rest. "After a good sleep she will be as fresh as new," the doctor had told them.

So, in her lonely chamber, by the light of one candle, Octave prepared to unburden herself of her great "Mystery."

Her fingers trembled so that she could hardly write, and her heart-beats were so loud she fancied that all the family must hear them. She began, without prelude, other than the conventional "Dear Aunt Ruth": —

The great surgeon is to come here to-morrow. I did n't know it till to-day, but he has been unexpectedly called back to Germany, and if he does n't come now, Melville's chance is gone forever. Perhaps it is as well so as any way, though I did want to have time to prepare your mind a little, for you do worry so.

And all this dreadful night, when Fritzy has been shooting Paula, there has lain poor Melville alone, and contemplating — to-morrow! I 've been with him as much as I could without making

Rosetta ask questions; but it was hard to manage. Of course, I could n't go in there without putting my dress on, and as fast as I would get it on Rosetta would come in and say, "Go to bed, deary. You can't do a mite o' good," in that motherly way of hers, till I thought I should just fly. Then, when I did get a chance to slip in to him, Melville would upbraid me for having no heart. I begged of him to let me tell the rest of the folks, but he would n't, not till morning, for he says, and I should say the same, that he could n't bear to have them talk about it, as they would be sure to; who, indeed, could help it?

Dear me! I 'm as bad as Rosetta, about punctuation and all that. But I am so excited, I don't know which end my head is on; of course that is unladylike to say, but you know what I mean. The surgeon is coming at ten o'clock. He is going to bring his own assistants with him. He hopes for it to be a success; because, when that young man came up and made the examination, he agreed with Fritzy Nunky, that Melville could be helped; that he was not really incurable, but it would only be by one operation and that a severe one. Fritzy Nunky is at the bottom of it; and I am in the middle; but Melville is at the top. You see it is he that has to suffer, either being a cripple all his life, or having something or other cut, which will let him walk some time, after he has learned how. Uncle says he will have to learn just as a baby does; but won't I just be willing to teach him!

That boy really has developed wonderfully, during the time he has been under my supervision. And he is behaving like a little hero, this very minute. Then the best part of it is that he is to be famous and heroic all at one and the same time. The last letter he had from Professor von Holsneck he said that every experiment but one had been successful. The professor is most enthusiastic; and I am so proud, because it was I who introduced him to the family. Of course, if anything goes wrong, I shall telegraph; but if you don't hear from me in that way, you will know that the operation is a success.

I can't write any more now, for my candle has burned out, and

I have it "borne in on me" that I should go to Melville. Oh, I forgot. I have n't told you but half the "Mystery" yet; but you will have to wait, for there goes the candle!

The letter had no signature; and it needed none. No one save Octave could have written it.

But by the same mail which carried it another was sent. This, composed by Content, had something more of lucidity, if also more that was startling.

The letter tells the story of what had been going on at The Snuggery better than it could otherwise be told.

DEAR AUNT RUTH:

This morning, at ten o'clock, a carriage drove up to our gate and out of it there stepped three gentlemen. Octave had just frightened us all nearly to death by telling us that Melville was this morning to undergo an operation to see if his limbs could not be straightened. The operation was considered a simple one, though it is comparatively a new one; and only one German surgeon has as yet performed it successfully. That surgeon is a friend of Mr. Pickel; and "Uncle Fritz" persuaded him to come up here and operate on Melville. This was at Melville's own request, and it was something which could be done here as well as in a hospital.

There was a trained woman nurse, and one of the three men is also a trained nurse, and he is to stay here until Melville is quite well again. The others were doctors, and Dr. Winslow was here with another physician from the village. Octave stayed in the

room all the time; and the only sign she showed of being frightened was when they called for Rosetta's long ironing-table, and carried that into Melville's sitting-room. She turned so white then that I thought she would faint, and I ran to her; but she put me away at once. "Don't! I am all right!" she said; and she seemed to be, but I couldn't have done it. As for Paula, she is in bed recovering from her shot-at episode. Christina has taken Fritz and gone away into the woods, and Rosetta is crying in the kitchen, or she was the last time I saw her.

This is part of the great MYSTERY which Melville and Octave have had; and it has all turned out splendidly. The operation is, as far as they can judge, a perfect success; and words cannot tell you how glad Melville is; but I don't believe he is half as glad as Octave. That girl just beams! They didn't tell you on account of grandma; and even Mr. Pickel didn't know when it was to be, though he has written heaps of letters and arranged everything as far as he could, being absent.

The other part, the Professor von Holsneck part is, as far as I understand it, like this: Melville has always been fond of messing with chemicals and weeds and things on that queer invalid table of his. All his experiments have had but one end in view; and that one such as a boy who has suffered so much would value the most. He wanted to cure pain. If he could not cure it, at least to ease it; and he has accomplished the most wonderful thing!

But, there is Octave calling. I do hope that nothing has happened! Luke is just going to the village, so I will send this right along, and write some more to-morrow.

Good by, in loving haste,

CONTENT.

CHAPTER XXII.

"LETTERS for me? That is good," said Ruth Kinsolving, as the pleasant-faced servant brought in the morning mail. "Home letters, too, Mother Amy."

Grandmother Kinsolving smiled. She had learned to watch her daughter's face with considerable amusement, whenever missives from the "pickle"-invaded Snuggery were received. There was always something in them to disquiet the order-loving little lady herself, but the real burden of anxiety was felt by Ruth.

Even when events appeared to the young folks in the old house to have been running with wonderful smoothness, these absent home-makers found cause for perplexity. Of late, however, there had been a dearth of "happenings"; and the soul of Ruth had something akin to that of Rosetta, in that she prophesied evil from this quietude.

"I dread to open them, mother. It is impos-

sible but that something out of common has occurred by this time."

"Read away, daughter. Thee had been growing wiser, I fancied; certainly, ever since thy visit home, thee has seemed less disturbed. But, read away! I am the one who is impatient now."

Ruth prepared to comply, but an interruption occurred in the shape of a visit from an invited guest; and the fateful epistles of Content and Octave were laid aside for a more convenient hour.

"There can be nothing in them that will not keep," said Ruth to herself, as she helped the guest to lay aside her wraps, and to make herself comfortable for the day.

The visitor was an old friend of Amy Kinsolving's youth; and there was something so pretty in the meeting of the old ladies that Ruth utterly forgot all other interests for the next few hours. Then, before the "convenient" one arrived, another guest appeared; and that one no other than Uncle Fritz himself.

To say that his unexpected arrival set every-

thing in commotion is to say only what would have been surmised by those who knew him best. But the commotion was still a happy one, and, if he knew anything of what Octave and Content had vainly tried to communicate, he did not mention it. Indeed, to Grandmother Kinsolving's inquiry as to when he had heard from the children he replied: "Oh, I have but just come from there, I made them a flying visit first, then hurried right away here. I did not know I could get off so soon, though it has indeed seemed long to me since I looked upon your face, dear madam"; and the genial gentleman bowed over Mother Amy's hand with a grace which won upon her heart, opposed even as it had always been to ceremonies.

After awhile it became evident to Aunt Ruth that Mr. Pickel had something which he particularly wished to say to her; and so, leaving her mother to enjoy her friend, the pretty Quakeress tied on her stiff bonnet and led him away to her favorite spot by the sea-shore. But, from the expression of his countenance, anxious perhaps, though not at all distressed, it did not appear

that he had come to be the bearer of ill tidings; and as his confidence had nothing especial in connection with the events then enacting at The Snuggery, it need not be speculated upon here.

Suffice it to say that this confidence delayed the two — and so unlike — guardians of "a jar of pickles" for such an unheard of length of time, that Mother Amy finally grew anxious, and dis patched the pleasant-faced servant to hunt the delinquents up.

They came in, at last, looking so at peace with themselves and all the world that Mrs. Kinsolving's own face brightened; though she opened her conversation with the gentle remonstrance: "I was sorry thee did not come in time to see friend Barbara off."

"O Mother Amy! That is too bad! Thee must forgive my inattention."

"It is nothing, of course; there was no especial reason why thee should have come, but I think she would have liked to speak with thee again."

Ruth glanced at Uncle Fritz, and said nothing.

What could she say, since till that moment she had quite forgotten the existence of friend Barbara Fletcher?

Uncle Fritz seemed, also, strangely unmindful of people's prejudices, for he sauntered to the window, whistling the very gayest and most worldly of operatic airs. Amy Kinsolving looked anxiously toward her daughter, fearing she would reprimand the gentleman for his lack of taste; but she need not have feared, though Ruth's fearless tongue had corrected more than one such offence, swift on its commission.

Since Ruth did not object, and seemed, indeed, to be lost in some happy thoughts of her own, Grandmother Amy softly sighed in her relief. Aloud she said:

"I need not ask thee if the children are doing as they should. I see by thy face that there is nothing amiss; but, if Fritz does not object, I should like to hear thee read the home letters now, daughter."

"The letters?" asked Ruth. She had forgotten them along with Barbara Fletcher! Again she shot that funny glance of hers "Fritzy

Nunky's" way, and this time a very pretty pinkish color crept up into her cheeks. "Mother! thee will think I am a heartless girl; but I had forgotten the letters, too. I have not read them."

"No, I do not think thee heartless — but please to read them now," answered Mother Amy, with a peculiar smile.

And with her cheeks brighter than ever, Ruth opened the two letters. "I'll glance through them first, mother; thee knows I like to do so." For this aunt of many tribulations had learned that there were some happenings which even her honest tongue would best withhold from the gentle old mistress of The Snuggery. If she had told Mother Amy quite all that went on in her beloved home, perhaps her recovery would not have been as rapid or as thorough as it had been.

Mrs. Kinsolving and Uncle Fritz fell into conversation, while Ruth extracted the sting, as it were, from the home letters before she shared them with the others. But, after awhile, it seemed even to these two patient souls as if this proceeding was one of infinite labor and thought,

judging from the time it consumed; and they turned from the window through which they had been watching the play of some little ones upon the lawn, to inquire the reason.

Then, with a cry of alarm, they each sprang forward, as Ruth, for almost the first time in her life, nearly succumbed to the weakness of fainting.

Nearly, but not quite. The terrified look in her mother's eyes, and Uncle Fritz's sustaining clasp recalled her fleeing senses. "I — I'd like a drink of — water!"

She had it on the instant, and, after she had drunken part of it, her color came back and she was able to speak quite firmly. "It is about as bad as it can be, but lest thee should think it worse than it is, I will try to read them. Fritz, thee should have told me."

Then she resolutely took hold of the closely written sheets, and, disdaining all Mr. Pickel's offers of assistance, read them through to the end. Those who were familiar with the varying tones of Ruth Kinsolving's voice would have judged from it then that she was very deeply

moved. Even Uncle Fritz, who should have been so much a stranger, understood it; and had Melville heard her he would certainly have said, "Aunt Ruth means business!"

Poor Mother Amy was almost as much disturbed by the tidings which were so ambiguously conveyed through Octave's and Content's stories as her daughter had been; but she was the first to recover her scattered wits. "Then, since no telegram has come, it must have all turned out for the best."

"It has, dear madam; it has, indeed!" cried Uncle Fritz.

"The best, Mother Amy! Can thee see any 'best' even in this?"

"Why, yes, my child. It is best for Melville to have had this chance, this Providential blessing; and it is as well that it should all have been gone through with without thy knowledge. Thee would have worried thyself ill."

"Humph!" said Ruth; replying to her mother as she had rarely before replied.

Then she turned to Uncle Fritz. "And so thee has known this all along, and did not tell me?"

Poor Fritzy Nunky almost shivered in his shoes; but, being of the same valiant stuff as his small nephew, he rallied to the occasion. "Yes, sweetheart, I knew. But I would not have had thee know it for a fortune, till it was done and safely done." At which remarkable speech Mother Amy opened her eyes most widely, though Ruth dropped hers.

"Well," said that young person at last, and after a rather uncomfortable silence; "since every inconceivable thing has happened which could happen, I suppose there is no objection to my going home."

"Not the least in the world," answered Uncle Fritz, generously.

"No; it is high time we went. Thee had best go and pack up, my daughter, while I have a word or two with Fritz, here. We will go home, or start for home to-night, by the evening boat." Grandmother Kinsolving's tone had that ring of authority she so rarely exercised, but which there was no mistaking.

Ruth gave her mother one glance, then stooped and kissed the fair old cheek before she

hurried from the room. But again the stalwart Fritz had fallen to trembling; and that before the gentlest of little women, in the meek garb of a Friend, whose question might mean much or little, according to the hearer's mood: "Well, Fritz?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE trained nurse had gone out of the room, leaving Octave in charge of the patient.

"You are patient and the patient, both, dear Melville," said the girl, affectionately laying her warm hand on the lad's thin one. "You are a hero! I've been wanting to say it ever since — three days ago; but that ever-watchful nurse has n't given me a chance. I'm as proud of you as proud!"

Melville smiled. "I am not much of a hero, dear; but I ought to be patient. Indeed, there does n't seem to be any need for that virtue now. Only think, in a very few weeks the surgeon said I could begin to try my limbs. Think! when I've lain here so many years, without the shadow of a hope that I should ever be any better! A fellow ought to be willing to bear anything for such a gain."

Octave's eyes filled. It had, strangely enough, never seemed half so pitiful to her that Melville

should be a cripple till this possibility of his cure arose to cheer them on. "Laddie, if it had been me, I should have been perfectly horrid. I — I think I should have had to be shut up in a cage."

"Nonsense! You would have been just the same happy, cheering-up body that you are now."

"Pooh! don't be silly. I never did iike flattery."

"But, it is n't flattery, Octave. You don't know how much you have done for me —"

"I do, beg pardon; I have laughed at you and scolded you and tormented you into doing things till you hated me and everybody. But, my son, I did it for your good. That is what the grown-up people remark when they are especially disagreeable. And is n't it splendid? That great doctor says he can cure Paula Pickel of trapesing around as a spook, at all hours of the night. He says he considers it only a nervous disorder, and that a prescription he gave me will help her. I told him about her while he was waiting to have Rosetta make him a cup of coffee,

that other day, after — after he'd fixed you up. I thought I'd make a clean business of everything, and get everybody patched up who needed mending. One I forgot, though. That was Luke. He declares that he has something the matter with his arms which keeps him from doing certain things he ought to do. He — Lukey Tewky — called me aside and asked me: 'What did he say about me?' 'Say about you! He did not even dream of your existence,' said I. 'Oh! do tell him about my arms, won't you?' and just then along came Abry-ham, and he caught hold of his son and shook him so that if anything ailed him it was shaken out."

Melville laughed as gaily as his entertainer desired, at this picture of the farmer and his son. "Keep his spirits up," the great surgeon had bidden her; "there is more healing in an unaffected laugh than in the whole *materia medica*." Which statement the wise man may not have intended to be taken as literally as Octave took it. However, it was certain that the girl who had devoted herself so unselfishly to her crippled cousin did him more good than any other com-

panion; and Melville would have had her in his sick-room all the time had he been allowed.

"Let's talk about the discovery; that is part mine, you know, if the surgeon part does belong to Fritzy Nunky. Nobody but just Octave would ever have dared to go and see such a wonderful creature as my dear old professor has turned out to be. I don't think *I* would dare do it again, after all Aunt Ruth's remarks about the boldness of it. I suppose it was dreadful, but I am awfully glad I did it, all the same. Are n't you?"

"Octave, it is almost too splendid to be true. Read this letter." The sick boy drew out from under his pillow a brief note from the great scientist, whose every written word had so genuine a value. If brief, it was also enthusiastic. The writer had seen the famous specialist, Dr. Karl Ettmüller, had learned that not only was the operation eminently successful but that the anæsthetic of Melville's discovery had been thoroughly and happily tested first in Melville's own case. He wrote to congratulate: "He who has reduced the burden of physical agony is a philanthropist, and he who discovers one of

God's own cures is a genius. My lad, I hold you to be both; and when you shall be physically able, I ask you to come and take a position in my laboratory. It will give the old man new vigor to feel that such an one as you is beside him."

"O Melville! Is it true? Is it really true? I shall have to pinch myself to make myself believe it." Octave's eyes were shining, and her cheeks glowed with delight.

"It is, it must be, true, Octave; since here it is in black and white. I have to take it out from under my pillow a dozen times a day to read it over, since I have n't your felicitous method of convincing myself. Octave, I 'd rather have that letter, that offer, than all the money in the world!"

"So would I!" cried the girl, responsively; then paused to purse up her merry lips in a doubtful fashion. "I don't know about that, though, laddie; all the money in all the world would be a 'purty consid'able of a pile,' as Abry-ham would say. One could do a heap of good with all that money."

"Well, don't be disagreeable, Octave. It is splendid, and you can't deny it."

"Who wishes to? See here, my friend, you may be a hero now, as I remarked a few minutes since, but you are not yet an angel. You are still quite — Capersy!"

Melville laughed. "I do not pose either as a hero or an angel; it is yourself who gives me the attributes of such. I only aspire —"

"Bless the lad! Don't begin to talk too booksy, just because you are a genius-philanthropist! But we did have a Mystery! Even Aunt Ruth will have to admit that; and we did keep it all to our two selves, with a few necessary others like Fritzy Nunky and the specialist and the scientist and the attendants, and —"

But the mutual-congratulation meeting was speedily broken up. Outside the house a strange uproar had arisen. Don brayed; Rosetta cried: "To goodness knows!" Fritzy set up a shout that could have been heard a long distance; Abraham gave the peculiar whistle that with him indicated intense and pleased surprise; doors slammed, even the well-trained doors of The

Snuggery, which had missed Aunt Ruth's frequent "oily feather"; feet sounded in a rush over the gravel walks. But none of these unwonted if joyful sounds could drown the cheery rumble of wheels, nor the "Hoa! halloa!" which only one hearty German throat could give.

"Fritzy Nunky! Fritzy Nunky!" shouted Octave, and started to run away.

Suddenly something stayed her speeding feet. Three months ago the something would have had no effect; but now she stopped, and going back to the bed-side sat down and laid her hand again on that of Melville.

Weak and shaken yet, by the ordeal he had so lately and so manfully passed through, he could not subdue the tremor which seized him at sound of the well-known voice. Unspeakable thoughts of pride and humility, affection and loneliness, stole through the invalid's mind. After all his achievments, after all his endurance — he was still alone. Aunt Ruth had her mother, the Pickels had their beloved guardian, but he — had only a memory of a love which had never

failed him, but which he had despised till it was lost. "Genius" and "philanthropist" others might call him; but at that moment of others' reunion, Melville remembered only that he was a sick and orphaned lad.

Then he felt the touch of sympathy upon his hand, and brought round his eyes from the wall where he had turned them to Octave's face.

"Why don't you go and meet your uncle?" he asked, pettishly.

"Because I would rather stay here," answered Octave, quietly.

"You need n't make a martyr of yourself!"

"Nor you a bear of yourself!"

"I would rather you went. I don't mind being left alone. I 'm used to it."

"That 's a — a fib; two fibs."

"You told one, too."

"I did n't, I told the truth; I want to stay."

"Then when he comes in, if he should come in, he —"

"Why should you mind seeing him now, since you have seen him once since — hush! he is

coming in now; so is Aunt Ruth; so is grandmother; so —-"

Well, my precious lambs! So I have found you together," said the sweet voice of Amy Kinsolving. "They have all told me what thee has done for Melville, little Octave. I knew thee had a good heart, dear!"

"Yes, together; and at our old occupation, — quarrelling," replied Octave, so demurely that everybody laughed, and any dangerous flood of sentiment was happily averted.

Then, how the tongues flew! How gay and how glad was everybody! And, how the silliest little speeches made everybody smile, only those who have been parted and happily reunited can fancy.

After grandmother had been put into Melville's easiest corner on the old lounge, which he boasted he had vacated forever, the "Mystery" was taken out of its hiding-place, and all that had been dimly understood made plain. The project of the surgeon's visit, and the project of the anæsthetic being tested by its discoverer in his own proper person, before he let it be on any

other human being — that was what the "Mystery" resolved itself into, when all was said and done.

But the greatest events of the world's history may be told in a few words; why, then, not these? Though the far-reaching effects of those events neither words which have been nor words which shall be said can ever half depict. So thought these loving hearts, it may be, under God's blessing, with Melville's discovery; a discovery he had doubtless never made had he not been laid upon a bed of physical helplessness, and left to observe and make his world out of the trivial happenings which went on before his one window. And the wisest know that in the wonderful economy of nature there is nothing trivial or beneath their notice.

A peaceful quietude fell on them all for a little while, and no one cared to speak or mar it. Grandmother Amy's face took on that look it always wore when her soul was moved by the Spirit. She was far away, just then, from her material surroundings, in that higher world which seemed to those who loved and watched her as her native air.

The silence might have continued much longer had not little Fritz been suddenly moved to "speak in meeting." He was opposed to sentiment in any shape, and he had borne as much of it as he could well endure. So, from his throne in Fritzy Nunky's arms, he stooped and whispered with startling distinctness: "I 'm awful hungry!"

With a relief that proved how close, after all, is the bond between flesh and spirit, every other member of the group promptly remembered that he or she was hungry, too.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME days later, Fritz appeared in the kitchen, only to be speedily informed by Rosetta that "I hain't no time to bother with young ones now! Here, take a cookie if ye want it, an' clear out!"

"I don't want a cookie, and I don't want to clear out. I want somebody to talk to."

"Talk ter somebody 't ain't so busy as I be, then! I've got about forty hundred things ter do this very day, an' here it is goin' on ten o'clock, a'ready."

"What 'forty hundered' things, Rosetta? Paula says that you zaggerate turribly. I don't know ezactly what zaggerate means, but I'm afraid it is somethin' like tellin' a lie. You would n't tell a lie, would you, Rosetta?" responded the little boy, in a tone that revealed his distress over Rosetta's danger.

"Here, if ye hev sunthin' ter do ye won't ast so many foolish questions. Take this bowl of raisins an' set down an' stun 'em."

That was labor wholly congenial to Fritzy's temper, or he fancied that it would be, and he obediently took the bowl and dropped upon the floor to "help Rosetta," as he had occasionally been allowed to do before.

The good woman was indeed very busy. She was a famous cook, but in all the time he had been at The Snuggery, Fritz had never smelled so many and such savory odors as permeated her kitchen at that moment. In the great Dutch oven, from "the hole in the wall," as he called it, there came whiffs of perfume suggesting to the chronically hungry child the delights of roasting fowls, and even the unusual but never-to-be-forgotten fragrance of a "little piggy cookin' whole."

The range oven was full of pies, the shelves of the pantry were laden with cakes and jellies, and even the little oil-stove was pressed into service to bake tin after tin of puffy looking biscuits. Fritz did n't understand it at all. And when he had asked Content why every one was "tearin' around as if they was possessed so for," she had answered him with honest sympathy: —

"I have n't the least idea in the world, dearie. It seems as if grandmother must be expecting a lot of company; for even we could n't eat half the stuff Rosetta is preparing. I asked Aunt Ruth if any one was coming, and she told me to 'watch out sharp and see.' I knew then that I was to ask no more questions; but I do hope we shall have a taste of all the nice things; don't you?"

"Don't I?" responded Fritz; and with that hope in mind he had invaded the kitchen.

Rosetta at last bethought herself that the child was unusually quiet, and paused in her vigorous thumping of the bread dough to look behind her toward his corner. There was a goodly pile of sticky seeds upon her polished floor; the bowl of raisins had become a bowl of emptiness; but in the basin which should have been filled, to make all the terms of the problem satisfactory, there were but a few torn and scraggy bits of fruit.

"Fritzy Pickel! What in the name o' common-sense! Where hev ye put them raisins?"

"Where? Wh — why, in the basin," answered

the boy, bending forward and looking into it with a perfectly satisfied expression on his dirty face. "Did n't you say to put 'em there?"

"That's just what I did say; but, ye bad boy, ye 've put ten in yer mouth ter ary one went inter the dish! I don't want no more sech help, an' ef my hands was n't all over dough, I 'd fix ye! Clear right out o' here, quick!"

Fritz waited no second order. Rosetta's face was not a pleasant one at that instant; but when he stopped to ask, from a prudently safe position outside the doorway, what she was "a-cookin' sech a lot for?" she replied savagely, if with something like tears in her eyes: "I 'm a-cookin' — fer folks! But I 'd a'most ruther do it fer a fun'ral!"

More perplexed than ever, and with that sort of feeling in his small stomach which demanded sympathy, he wandered away into "grandmother's part" of the house. It was always sunshiny and delightful in "grandmother's part," and to it as a haven of rest the raisin-surfeited youngster turned, secure of a reception that would be kind.

"I'll tell grandma about that old Rosetta thing! She's crosser than cross!" But though grandmother smiled sweetly upon her little grandson as he entered, it was in an absent sort of way which seemed rather the force of habit than of welcome. She was talking with Fritzy Nunky; and, as naturally as possible, Fritz second marched to the uncle's knee to be lifted up.

"Nunky can't take you now, little man Run away and read your books in the corner."

Fritzy was mad. And his stomach did begin to feel very queer. He kept tasting raisins and tasting them, till he felt as if he should never care to see another. But as there was absolutely nothing else to be done, he went to the corner designated, and sat down to look at pictures.

Grandmother and Uncle Fritz paid no attention to him; indeed, they quite forgot his presence, and went on talking as if he were a nobody. Fritz resented this at first; then he became interested in what they were saying; and at a word of Uncle Fritz about Munich and the schools there, he sat up and listened intently.

"Nay, Fritz!" said grandmother; and her

voice had rarely sounded so sharp. "Nay, thee must not ask that. Thee is taking the light of my eyes away from me in my old age, but thee must leave me my children's children."

That was queer, was n't it? Yet Uncle Fritz appeared to be doing nothing but sitting there in the easy-chair and looking straight upon the carpet. Finally, he replied: —

"Thou must not blame me, Mother Amy. Thou shouldst blame thy own self, who hast made her the lovely woman that she is. I could not help but love her; and thou — thou must have left thy mother's side also."

"Does thee think I will fight against nature, Fritz? I blame nobody; but when thee and she think to rob me of my little ones, then I will not let thee have thy will."

Fritz second began to be very much interested, indeed. He forgot all about the "raisiny-pain," and pictured pages were as dross. He knew they were talking about "the children," and that included himself.

"But the care, think of the care. Even for the six months that we shall be away it will be too much for thy feeble strength."

"Humph!" said grandmother, and she said it exactly like Aunt Ruth. "I am only seventy-seven years of age. I have excellent health, and my parents lived to be over ninety."

"If thou wouldst only go with us!" pleaded Fritzy Nunky, eloquently.

Grandmother shook her head vigorously. "In this house I have lived ever since my husband left me. In this house I will remain till my own summons comes. Having nobody else to cosset, Ruth has cosseted me, and pretended to her loving heart that I required it. I do not. I am fully capable of caring for all those whom the Lord sends to my keeping. I have thought it all out. There shall come a governess here, and the children shall be regularly taught all that it is necessary they should know. Melville will be with his great professor in a very few weeks, so friend Winslow tells me. The rest of us will abide in our place and be at peace. Go, thee and Ruth, and be as happy as were my companion and I. I could wish thee nothing more; but take this step only in the fear of the Lord."

Fritzy got up and walked softly to his grandmother's chair.

By that time Fritzy Nunky was pacing up the long apartment and down again, in a very disturbed sort of fashion. No wonder, Fritz the second thought, if, as grandmother said, he was really taking away from her the light of her eyes! The child felt a sudden revulsion of feeling toward his beloved guardian of which he might not have been thought capable. He cast a scowling glance upon the burly, striding figure, and wished that he could fight it. Then he leaned his sticky hands on Mother Amy's knees and peered curiously up into her tear-dimmed eyes.

"What is it, little lad?" asked the old lady gently, and bending down to kiss her darlings' face.

"Is he really doing it? What makes him? And does it hurt you very much?"

"Doing what, Fritz?"

"Taking the light out of your eyes."

"Nay, nay! not wholly so!" cried Grandmother Amy, bending her face upon the sturdy little shoulder of the child; "he cannot do that, little one, while he leaves me thee."

Then Fritz climbed up into her lap, and scowled ferociously at Uncle Fritz, who — terrified, it may be — went quickly out and closed the door.

But the hubbub of the kitchen did not extend to the other parts of the great house; though, strangely enough, Aunt Ruth seemed to have found plenty of occupation for everybody's hands; though she assigned the various tasks with a sort of gentle sadness which surprised the toilers, so different was it from her usual brisk activity. And when Octave had finished her allotted portion she sped to Melville's room to talk it over.

"My son, there is another 'Mystery' afoot. I know it, I feel it! It 's 'borne in on me.' There has been food enough cooked to feed a regiment, and every nook and cranny of this mansion has been swept and garnished. Strangest part of all, Aunt Ruth is in it; and I 'm inclined to think that Fritzy Nunky is too, for he acts so queer! A few minutes ago he met me in the hall, and he stopped me and kissed me. 'I wonder if I am doing right by thee, my child,' he said, in the gravest fashion. I told him I considered that he

was doing exactly right; for this very morning he called me into his room and gave me a pretty silver watch, and a pocket-book with ten whole dollars in it. Think of that, Melville Capers! I, Octave Pickel, the impecunious, with ten real dollars all my very own!"

"It is almost incredible. But don't worry; you'll not have them long; you have no liking for money," answered Melville, consolingly.

"Humph! I do so like it — to spend!"

"I, too, think there is another 'Mystery'; but it can never be half so splendid as ours. I think your Uncle Fritz is in it even more deeply than Aunt Ruth. This morning, it must have been after he had given you the pocket-book, he came in to see me; and he talked to me so seriously about my responsibility as the 'head of the family in America,' that I could n't believe my own ears. It did n't seem at all like his jolly self; and, 'Mystery' or not, I don't believe that these other conspirators are getting half as much fun, or good either, out of it as we did out of ours. There is a lot of company coming, though, I know. Grandmother never had so

much cooked before, Abry-ham says, even for 'yearly meeting,' when she has a houseful of thees and thous."

In came Paula, visibly excited, and in great haste. "Octave, Aunt Ruth says we are to go up stairs and put on our best dresses, for there is company coming. A lot of old Quaker Friends, and who do you think? Why, the great doctor and the great professor and his wife, and the village folks, and everybody you can think of. I knew you'd have to mend your frock, for you tore it the last time you had it on, so I thought I'd tell you right away."

"Oh, bother! I hate company! I wanted Octave to help me with some problems. We haven't had one single minute to study since the folks came home!" exclaimed Melville, peevishly.

"Well, I've borne that deprivation in an angelic spirit," retorted Octave; who found sitting patiently to work out Melville's incomprehensible problems a terrible tax upon her restless spirit.

"But Aunt Ruth beats me; she ought to be in a perfect fever of nervousness, but she is as calm — as calm!" said Melville, who had re-

ceived many unusual visits from her during that morning. Visits which appeared to have no special object, but which were apparently intended as sympathetic, — that is, as far as Melville could understand them.

Soon after dinner the expected guests began to arrive; and even then Ruth was everywhere about the house, receiving her friends and showing them to the most comfortable seats in the great, old-fashioned parlor, which had been thrown open to the fresh September air, and from which a door opening into Melville's sitting-room had been unlocked, for the first time in many years. His cot had been rolled to this door-way, and there he lay conversing with his revered professor, who had promptly appeared on the noon train.

The great surgeon and Uncle Fritz were deep in the discussion of a "beautiful case" which Fritz must be sure to see when he passed through London.

London! Was he going away to it soon? Octave felt her heart sink strangely; and she unconsciously clutched little Fritz's hand so that he protested.

Then everybody came in from all the rooms where they had been wandering; even Rosetta, in a clean print gown, and Abry-ham in his Sunday clothes, and Luke, smelling of bear's oil and pomatum. And they ranged themselves all around the place, so "fer all the world like a fun'ral" that Rosetta was seized then and there with a desire to weep. When she did so, with audible moans, it was high time to put an end to the — "Mystery."

So, evidently, thought Uncle Fritz; for he arose and, crossing to Aunt Ruth's side, held out his great hand invitingly.

Then she, looking like a sweet blush rose, wrapped in a cloak of soft gray moss, stood up and faced him; and before anybody could do much more than sigh their amazement, those two people had — married themselves!

So that was the "Mystery" then! A Quaker wedding! "Pooh!" said Melville; "it was n't half so great as ours. *Anybody* can get married!"

Then there was such a deal of hand-shaking and good-wishing that Octave could n't just bear it. She was sorry and she was glad; and all she

knew was that she was thankful when it was over, and the whole family gathered in characteristic groups to watch the misbehaving aunt and uncle drive away.

There was Octave, supporting Melville so that he could see through the window what others witnessed from the door-way; "the girls," with Christina between them, clinging together on the steps; and Fritzy, close beside Grandmother Amy.

Aunt Ruth leaned far out of the carriage, and her face was all a conflict of joy and pain. "Fare thee well, my mother! Do not thee misjudge me, and do — keep safe!"

"Pooh! Aunt Ruthy, don't you worry. *I'll* take care of her." said little Fritz; and the last glimpse Ruth caught of her home showed that valiant lad with his arms about his grandmother's waist, and the protecting pride of manhood in his honest blue eyes.

THE END.

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